

# **AN INNOCENT IN ENGLAND**



**ALYSE SIMPSON**

Lyse's ideal. To marry John, leave her native Switzerland, and go with him to his England was what she had set her heart on. It was all so easy. They bought each other rings, were married, and went by train and boat to the country that was to be 'home'; but Lyse reckoned without her mother-in-law. Mother, English to her very rigid backbone did not take kindly to an alien as her son's wife. Mother had never planned that John should marry a foreigner --it was, after all, such a drawback for an Englishman --but faced with the accomplished fact she could at least do all in her considerable power to transform this particular undesirable into an acceptable Englishwoman.

First things coming first, Mother waged her personal war on Swiss underclothes, for fine lawn and hand-embroidery were not suitable for English life, nor to move farther up, were gay red hats with feathers--which anyway only went limp under the Midland drizzle. Mother's attempts at family integration were not markedly successful. On her side Lyse had two invaluable assets: she loved her husband, and she never lost her sense of humour. Faced with a plethora of aunts and influential friends, faced even with John's first love --his green tandem-- she upheld, as best she could, her Swiss ideas of industry and democracy. But it was the members of her own generation and eventually The Pines, that semi-detached tombstone, that taught her that home is where the heart is.

Mrs. Simpson writes from personal experience. It is lucky for the English that such an 'alien' never gave in before the seemingly overwhelming Englishness of her adopted home, but survived to tell this deliciously funny and heart-warming story.

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**I THREW A ROSE INTO THE SEA**

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by

ALYSE SIMPSON



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## Chapter One

ONE day in February 1921 I walked away from the Convent of the Sacred Heart, toiling for several miles along a country road to the nearest railway station, feeling rather guilty. The moon was still gleaming brightly. Innumerable little sins with which most of us at the convent had been pre-occupied, darted at me from right and left like arrows. Not long ago, filled with lofty enthusiasm, I supposed myself a future abbess, an elect spirit, a saint even, and now I had decided to get married after all to a strong silent man like John who was almost certain to be waiting for me still; a man who was slow to rouse, who leisurely removed his pipe from his mouth, knocked out the ashes, blew through the stem before replying to any of those favourite questions of mine about life and death. What wisdom this fiddling with a pipe seemed to have given to his answers.

On the evening before, kneeling in the chapel, I had once more waited in vain for that inner glow which would have proved that contact had been made with God; it was hard to bear for I had once been full of love. Before us on the altar was the image of the Virgin lightly holding the Child. She always drew our eyes to herself, to the air of gentle meekness which lay in her pursed little mouth and shone

like a gentle beam in her look. Some of the novices, especially the two Italians, taking the cue from the image were, as always, overdoing the air of loving renunciation. I knew that I should not have noticed this and, as was the rule, kept my eyes lowered, for in church we were anonymous and no concern of each other while we were meditating. Yet the very branches of the oak tree which stood in the middle of the churchyard seemed to point the way I had come two years before. As I watched the one and only candle on the sky-blue altar puff and flicker from the draught around us, I tried my best to search my heart and to reflect maturely, but all that occupied my mind just then was that the world was slipping through my fingers. Never before had the world outside seemed so new, so brave and so exciting.

Two long winters I had now spent in this vast building with over two hundred rooms which rarely echoed with a male voice, except, occasionally, a priest's. Sometimes a father or brother was allowed to visit one of the nuns to sit with her for a short half-hour in the refectory, but one of the sisters, whose way of thinking held a mass of strict morality and who did not believe in such visits, carefully sprinkled some blessed water wherever their large male feet had carried worldliness and contagion. She also opened the windows wide to dispel the 'musky smell' they had left behind them.

There was still a rime of frost on the bramble bushes surrounding the churchyard. The chapel was chilly and the air from the glaciers breathed coldly upon us through the very walls of this ancient building. Our mournful little bell began to toll. It seemed to me like an ode from the grave. We left the chapel one by one, the dark forms of the sisters gliding silently up the garden path, along the polished corridors, down the cloisters to their frugal supper. I knew

that this silent little procession would now be engraved on my heart for ever, as in the early morning I would be gone.

Walking along that rutted road to catch my train, not altogether happily, I was deep in thought. A few tears dropped down upon my black gown and my black regulation boots. There was not a soul about. Already the bells were ringing for early Mass. They made me feel a little mean, having said nothing to anyone about leaving. I had once been so eager to live a purely spiritual life, the least commonplace I could imagine. And now I was someone else. I wanted to call down the saints from Heaven to come and tell me that the time I spent at Sacred Heart had not been wasted and completely fruitless.

I stopped to put down my bag, looking back once more; but it was too late. The convent roof had disappeared behind the horizon. Convents always seemed to have been built in valleys or back streets, whereas monasteries, where monks spent their lives, were on the mountain tops, clinging to escarpments like birds' nests, with a view that made you wish to weep with ecstasy; where waterfalls plunged fathoms down to the tops of pine trees often hidden in mist, and they themselves were lifted higher still into the sun, which made them very mystic.

The morning sun slanted across the lake and from the height of the nearest village I could see the tower of Sacred Heart once more. The reeds on Lake Thun were motionless. The village church of Holy Cross struck seven and was answered by the convent's clock three miles away. 'Good-bye,' I said to myself, 'good-bye Madonna with the pursed little smile, the ceiling with the golden stars. Good-bye to perfect safety and shelter, and the thousand and one joyful little miracles that happen in such places, the pond with the

water lilies and the singing of the Psalms on Sunday afternoons. Good-bye my friends and don't think badly of me for having left like this.'

Picking up my bag once more, I pulled myself together. In three hours' time I would be in Altbad where I was born, a village of three thousand inhabitants including the peasants on the outskirts, the two hotels, the Kurhaus and the Belvedere, the savings bank, the Justice of the Peace, and the five medical men who somehow made a living there. There was also the clerk of the municipality to whom we punctually paid our taxes, the income tax, the state's tax, the cantonal tax, the school tax, the church tax and others. My papa was a burger of course, his family had been right back through several generations. Not that belonging to a highly respected family in a small place like Altbad would be the slightest help to me once I left and married John.

I walked faster. I did not want to miss that train. I was now nearly twenty-two and for a girl wanting to marry time was running out. The last time I had seen John I had taken him to visit one aunt after another to show him off, but because Mama had not approved, I had later to meet him secretly on that little island on Lake Constance where Aunt Ida lived and where willows dipped so softly into the lapping water. Mama, who was a powerful character, found out of course and forbade me to see him again before he left for England. Besides, we were far too young to wed.

All the following summer, I was waiting for him to come again. Week after week I walked down the village street after the train drew in, hoping to meet him, and as I sat waiting for him by the window, like a maiden of old, I decided to join the nuns at Sacred Heart. Many said I had gone there for psychological reasons. It is true, one had to give one's heart to something and I thought it best to give it to a mystery. Already it seemed a thousand years ago.

## Chapter Two

My parents were overwhelmed when I returned. I told them that I had come back to marry John, if he would still have me. Mama was so relieved that I had not yet taken the veil and made my final vows that she said she would agree if only John would come and live in Altbad. There was, we all knew, no hope of that. There would be nothing for him to do. One had to be born in it. Besides, I wanted to become a citizen of a wider world.

Later, lying in my bed, which was so much softer than my cot had been at Sacred Heart, I tried to visualize the days ahead when I would be John's wife. England, I sighed, how I liked the name. There would be the sea! But had I not been much too rash? Two years were a long time when you were young, yet I had never been able to imagine John marrying anybody else, even at Sacred Heart, where I had really meant to stay . . . at first.

I tried to say my prayers, but now I could no longer concentrate. Everything got mixed up. The *Lives of Saints*, which I had been reading constantly, the lustre of living with perfect goodness and shared poverty, the desire for worldly happiness, excitement and comforts, and my infidelity to



something out of this world. These things were all in me and would remain forever.

In the morning when the sun rose, I stretched myself luxuriously. I would have to make the world my business. I asked myself what my abilities were to face it and to hold my own. I could speak three languages and play the piano and the organ. I could also cook. I had learnt it in the convent's kitchens, cooking for visiting dignitaries. I remembered those exquisite and exotic meals we had sometimes served in the guest room and how they had made our mouths water. Golden breasts of chickens with mushrooms, sauces made of cognac, and sweets concocted of brandy, kirsch and whipped cream. It had quite startled some of the more ascetic guests and nearly robbed some of the humbler monks of their self-possession, but seemed to have pleased them nevertheless.

I dressed and went to Mass after Mama gave my hair some real brushing. It was quite a venture, walking down the aisle, for a girl who had so dramatically renounced the world so short a time ago. No one had expected me to come back. Even Father Claudius gave me one long questioning look as he strode up and down, sprinkling holy water. As I appeared after Mass a hush fell over the young women who were promenading outside the church. One or two smiled and showed some sympathy. But this did not help me much. I felt lonely and ridiculous. I fled and walked towards the stream. Down there among the rocks, a few anemones pushed their way through the lingering snow and the rowan tree was covered with iced berries. It had been covered with snow the last time I had seen John. I wanted to embrace it.

Oh, if he would only come and take me away. But would he come? One could not be sure, even though I had been told how he had been seen in the village once or twice,

apparently looking for me. The church bells were throbbing and booming so much it was hardly possible to dream of love. They rose and fell and were madly calling one's soul away, making you wonder if you were lost.

## Chapter Three

I SHALL always remember John's coming. Mama had gone to the nearest town to buy some clothes for me. A corset first of all, for we had not worn them at the convent. It had not mattered there. Not that I needed it now, for I was as thin as a post.

I drifted down into the village to see if any mail had come for me. Elderly English tourists who had come to skate and curl were walking about the streets looking at shop windows—the chemist's that sold patent medicines and showed a tapeworm conserved in spirit, gleaming whitely through pale blue glass, and the butcher's next door, who had hung up the entrails of a calf on a hook, priced at one franc the kilo, and the exquisite hand-embroidered blouses at the emporium, made by pale old women in a stuffy room behind the sawmill. These were exciting things to see in my opinion, over which I pored whenever I had time, but the English turned their heads away, looking slightly shocked.

Perhaps it was true that they were inclined to reject the spirit of other places, never wanting or enjoying anything but what they were used to. Perhaps it was this enviable air of indifference or incuriosity some British faces conveyed which made us villagers think that they were proud. Or perhaps we,

at Altbad, were too humble, since we had always been confronted by our great white haughty peaks staring in at our windows.

I felt absolutely certain John would be on the three-thirty train that had just drawn in and when he came round the corner by the station-cum-post-office, I was not in the least surprised. But neither of us knew what to say. He was looking older. Smiling up at him rather bashfully, I thought that even should he be as insular as some of these tourists, it would not matter in the least. He would be kind and he would show me the world.

We did not kiss. 'Darling' was all he said as we walked, up the hill. It began to snow. The village gave itself over to silence; just we two walking along, smiling at each other now and then. The girls in the little factory along the road, rattling their sewing-machines behind steamed-up windows, were whipping up my trousseau. But John was not to know. He had not, after all, really proposed to me yet. Not like the Swiss do, formally.

We threaded our way up to the Hotel Belvedere where John had booked a room. All the fir trees were drooping. The village looked lonely and forlorn, as any place does covered in snow. 'Why, it's beautiful,' said John, and as he stamped his feet inside the porch of the hotel, and since no one was about, he did not hesitate to kiss me.

John was lovable, anyone could see. He was also tall, with good shoulders, and looked every inch a male. When he smiled it was good to see. It seemed almost unbelievable that he had come so soon after I had told him I was home again. All the time I had been worrying and not daring to hope, the skies had poured snow down upon the village. It was a time for poetry. I read Heine's love poems over and over again and even wrote some myself, plunged as I was in melancholy.

And now—he had just returned from the Santis shaking the snow from his rather dingy gabardine suit—we sat by the stove in Papa's study. 'You never told me why you went into that convent,' he said. It always gave me pleasure to talk about myself, examining the whys and wherefores and taking my soul to pieces. But I could not help wondering if he would understand such a crisis of the spirit, and whether it mattered whether he did. Just as I was about to explain he said, 'Never mind, darling, let's forget it.' He went up to the window and turned his back to me. His face looked shy and very English. He lit his pipe and when he turned he said that spending one's childhood in a place like Altbad must be very wonderful and would no doubt influence a girl, and her wanting to be a nun was probably just part of growing up.

'What about your childhood?' I asked. I was full of curiosity, wanting to know everything about his family. There was really nothing much to tell, he said. He did not think that they wanted explaining, they were just ordinary people. He went away from home to school when he was still a child. I tried to visualize his home, but it was not easy. It did not seem so very important, either.

Then John went to fetch the present his mother had sent for me. It was a dress. Not an extravagant dress, a woollen suit made of jersey, very English, the colour of wet sand. 'Try it on,' he said, smiling. I pulled it over my blouse and skirt, knowing perfectly well that that muddy shade made me look very pale. Mama came from her room and our help came from the kitchen to stare at me, fingering the material, saying that it was very good and very kind of his mother, not caring for the colour, but not saying so. John looked pleased. 'It suits her, I think,' he said, and we all agreed.

A few days later, we bought each other's wedding rings as is the custom among the Swiss, and had them duly engraved by the watch-maker in Appenzell. An expression of affection

and amusement came over John's face as I slipped his ring on to his finger. He held up his hand and said, 'Thank you, darling, very much.' I did not know then that wedding rings were not really worn by men in England.

I was tremendously proud to be seen with John, walking through the village—a man so tall, who listened to me so attentively as I talked of my relations, of this and that and of those mystical urges of my recent past. I kept wishing that he would also do some talking and tell me more about himself. He did mention the Midlands though, where he was born, a place with plenty of chimneys and blackened buildings, and sometimes an east wind blowing 'that hit you like a wall'.

Delighted with everything and each other we went inside the church where we would be married soon, and, being alone in there, we embraced standing in the aisle, I with an anxious little prayer in my heart, and John closing his eyes for a moment as though he had just thrown a coin into a wishing-well. There was really such a difference between our two worlds, John's and mine, our childhood, our upbringing, our beliefs, that it seemed miraculous to be so sure of our love as to make all else seem unimportant.

## Chapter Four

As I was sitting on a wall above the pavements of London Road in John's Midland town, I was thinking of these things. I imagined I could hear an old Swiss song floating out of nowhere across the trees which lined the street up which any minute now the King and Queen of England were to pass. The road was narrow and full of strange smells. In my lap I had an English flag, which I was about to wave. Nothing seemed quite real though for I still felt remote, with the Channel and a few other countries between me and the scenes where I grew up.

Below me, tall, graceful, erect young policemen spread themselves out along the route, struggling to keep people off the road. One of them kept glancing my way, making me wonder if he guessed that I was foreign and came from a village where eagles soared from their nests above the cliffs. On a board near by belonging to a Wesleyan chapel it said, 'The meek shall eat and be satisfied'. Not having Sister Norberta, the Novice Mistress, at hand any more to explain such sayings, they did not always make sense to me. On the other side of the road some hoardings made a solitary splash of colour in a very drab street. They said, 'Drink this for energy' and 'Wash with this for whiteness'. Surrounded by a

deep red border, a poster asked, 'Vote for Charles Wright, Labour'. Labour, Labour, I thought, like the German word *Arbeit*, had a nice, almost holy sound. The world had made it prosaic though, making it mean what it was not. At least, it was so at home in my country where prosperity had mostly been achieved by frugality as well as hard work by all, and where anybody voting 'Labour' was called a 'Sozzy', which was not very complimentary.

Sitting there on a damp wall, looking away over the town, I thought of another sunnier wall hidden beneath pink oleander bushes, white convolvulus, tuberose and ivy, belonging to the church I was married in.

Suddenly everyone began to shout 'Hurrah', and then I saw the Queen, being driven very slowly, looking very lovely in a pale pink hat trimmed with ostrich feathers. The King, sitting by her side, wore, like anybody else, a navy suit and a bowler hat. In the carriages following the Royal couple, sat my husband's aunts, wearing their new hats, furs, and taffeta gowns in shades of brown and purple, looking very grand, like statues cast in bronze, both of them rather flushed, their faces shiny. They did not bow or smile like the Queen, or raise their hands, but gazed sternly ahead where thick clouds obscured the sun, and the centre of the town stood in mist. In the last carriage sat Mother's friend, Mrs. Hemmingway, a mountain of a woman covered in blue satin, topped by a large hat. She too was looking ahead with the same fixed smile as the aunts. She was majestic.

Seeing all John's relations mixing with the *élite*, filled me with awe, for I had never lived among such important people. Not that it was natural for a girl from the Swiss mountains to be so bothered about royalty and class. With us in our valley, most people worked on the land, or the federal railways and at the Customs. My papa was a *Zollamtvorstand*, which, I was sure, had no equivalent in England. Many of my school



friends were daughters of small manufacturers, shopkeepers, shunters and foremen at the *Bundesbahn*. There were also the professionals, but they were no better off than we. These were no trifling occupations, much depended on how well these jobs were done and everyone had their pride in them, even though, as it now dawned on me, such humble backgrounds would not mean anything to John's family.

I slipped down from the wall to follow the throng of people who were now hurrying home. Children lost their flags which were trampled down in the mud, factory workers slowly returned to work, and I was vaguely reminded of the sudden prosaic ending of the annual procession at home on Corpus Christi Day, when the pink and white statues of the Queen of Heaven were snatched from the wayside altars as soon as the procession had gone by, put on a handcart and rushed down a side street by a handful of boys, to be put away in the local nunnery for another year, and the local butcher who had soberly carried the pale blue embroidered banner, hastened back to his shop to put on his bloody apron again, and where the saintly Widow Muller was removing the images of the holy ones from her window-sill.

I did not take the bus, but walked home through a dark little park called Lime Tree Avenue, where lofty trees, meeting high above, casting an emerald sheen, made me think of gnomes and witches, and Grandmama on Papa's side, who lived in a glade on the edge of a forest in the canton of St. Gallen, where there was also an emerald haze around you most of the time. It was silent here in the little park, as if someone had suddenly shut a door. I liked being alone now and then, but to be alone in a wood was different from being alone in a strange city with, as yet, no proper home to go to, where everything was unreal, people's faces, people's speech, where I felt bereft of all my history. It is true I had met John's aunts, dear John, who was now sitting in an office

working in his father's business, but these people appeared to have found it somewhat distressing to have an alien in their midst. Or so it seemed to me.

Walking through this little wood, a blessed feeling of peace descended upon me. I was free. One could be wonderfully free in a strange town where no one knows you; like one of God's sparrows. I was my own mistress now and some day, when I knew English better, I would read all the English classics and write a diary to keep myself from being lonely while John was out all day.

As I walked on under the still dripping trees, I longed a little for my grandmama. I wished I could have told her of these impressive relations who had greeted me so coolly. How she would have laughed. Alas, she did not laugh any more. She was dead. 'Oh, Grandmama,' I sighed, speaking audibly to myself, 'you too married your first love without counting the cost!'

Some couples sitting on damp green benches nearby were kissing and I hoped that they too, the same as I, would have no memories of other loves.

When I first met John at the age of sixteen or so I was struck by his qualities of calm and silence, his ever gentle voice. But Mama was up in arms. 'Holy Maria and Joseph,' she had cried, 'don't fall in love with an Englishman. You'd weep your eyes out living up in the north!' Besides, she could not see that I could become enchanted by the rugged outdoor type, because she preferred sophisticated men. She also had someone else earmarked for me to marry. Her best, and lately deceased, friend's son, Marti, the old doctor's son, who was still studying. I had known him since I was a baby. He had always been a cocksure boy and rather studious. Lately, during his holidays, he gave me inch by inch descriptions of operations and a full account of a difficult confinement. He

said we did not love with the heart, but with the liver. In fact, all feeling proceeded either from the stomach, the spleen, the gall, the lungs or the brain. It simplified romantic conceptions, he said. I looked shocked, but Marti just threw back his head and roared. At the same time he pointed out how neatly my papa's field adjoined that of his father's and how one might build a clinic or something on it one day.

When he wanted to get hold of my hand, I quickly withdrew, wondering if he were right about one's emotions having their origin in one's gall. It was pretty revolting.

. It was magic to be young and fly like a balloon in the upwind. 'I am,' I said to myself as I walked along; 'I can breathe even though the air is laden with smoke and soot. I can sing myself a song with all the fervour with which we Swiss sing our songs!' So I hummed myself a *lied* about the Golden Evening Star on my way to The Pines, which was now my home. I would have liked to call it by a more romantic name like 'Stella Maris' or 'Sans-Souci'. John did not think this a very good idea. On a hilly road called Attenborough Drive, almost hidden behind fences and walls, were the houses belonging to some of John's relations. They were covered with grey stucco or were built of liver-coloured brick, but had no God-fearing inscriptions on them like 'Home is best', or 'In all we do God is with us', like Papa's homestead. I expect one could be proud of a house like that too. Like fortresses, like mausoleums they stood, wide stone window-sills matching tall stone pillars at either side of the solid doors on which stone urns held large green plants like aspidistras. I walked a little faster, for ever since I had arrived in England I had been shivering, even though I wore my thickest jumpers.

And here was The Pines, the house in which, it seemed, I had bound myself to live for ever. I wondered what my

mama would think of it. It was not the kind of house a person from the mountains would take to without a struggle ; it had no personality ! I had wakened in it several mornings now with a start wondering if its very shape, its walls even, would brand me as an alien. Always.

John was chopping wood in the backyard and, since no one could see us, he flung his arms around me and lifted me off the ground. Inside, a log was burning in the hearth. It spoke a gentle welcome in this strange room which held only a few things which I had brought from home and which looked out of place taken as they were from different surroundings. Draughts came sweeping through the doors and from behind the curtains.

John poked the fire until it crackled merrily. He wanted me to tell him all about the procession. He had no need to ask me, for I could never resist describing anything I heard or saw. I could also mimic his aunts. It was easy. I held up my head in a queenly sort of way, widened my nostrils and shut my mouth tight. I sat on the edge of the chair, spread my skirt and put a cushion on my head, bowing a little, and John said I made things much more vivid to him than they had hitherto seemed to be.

However, my mood changed almost at once. I had been taught so much about charity and brotherly love that it was really tiresome. I began to moan a little about how unimportant and strange I felt, but John did not like me saying things like that. He just did not see it. He did not know how easy it was for a girl like me to feel depressed.

## Chapter Five

FROM Dover to London I wanted to see what the scenery was like, but the locomotive seemed to want to cover the distance in abnormally quick time and hid the landscape with billowing smoke which blew low along the train like a horde of dirty ghosts. John, who did not seem to care about the local scenery, sat contentedly in his corner. There was something about him that often made me want to smile. How the girls in Altbad had envied me my John. Marrying an Englishman was something that but rarely happened to one of us. And, of course, all Englishmen were rich. They were so rich and had been rich so long that they were improvident.

I had with me, tucked away in my handbag, a couple of cheques which were my dowry. I decided there and then to give them both to John.

‘Hold on,’ he said, looking quite startled when he saw what I was up to. ‘I don’t want your money. What do you take me for?’

‘Well, I don’t want to carry them about with me. Besides,’ I pointed out, ‘it’s customary with us, it’s the law that what belongs to the wife also belongs to the husband.’ John grinned.

‘It’s a most amazingly good idea,’ he said. Then his face

broke into such a tender smile that it overwhelmed me. John was full of such surprises. It made me very happy and I saw wonderful things coming my way, in the future. Watching him, looking entirely contented puffing away at his pipe, I could not help wondering though, if refusing my money he had both feet on the ground and was, in fact, a good and sensible businessman, or if he too, like the British were said to be in general, was improvident.

Fussing about inside my suitcase, I picked out many things I brought with me. There was a waistcoat embroidered with innumerable cross-stitches for John's father. It did seem rather loud now I was in England. Perhaps it was the kind of garment that needed the sun. There was the picture Father Claudius had given me to hang over my bed, portraying the Agony in the Garden. There were also many presents for John's aunts and relations, some ingenious musical boxes, some scent and chocolates. It would be most exciting meeting them all. For his mother I had a slim volume of poetry I had written myself of an evening by candlelight in my cell. A friend of Papa's, who edited the local paper, had them printed and bound for me. They were terribly sad and sentimental poems, it is true, all about maidens who died an early death, or bloomed unseen, and about cypresses and willows, and primroses on someone's grave.

I had, it was easy to see as you leafed through the book, ever since I went to Sacred Heart, been quite convinced that I had a soul above the common herd. I was not now so sure and could not help wondering a little if it would be a suitable gift for John's mother after all, and when I asked him, he hummed and hawed a bit and said he did not think his mother would appreciate it very much and that in England it was not a bad thing to keep such things dark. I hastily withdrew the little volume which I had held out to him and almost wide-eyed with astonishment I said, 'Why?'

‘Oh, darling, I don’t know. You see we always keep our feelings hidden from the world.’

This set me thinking hard. Even though England was not Siberia or the desert it seemed to me all at once more alien than Italy or France or Germany. Far more different. As if to comfort me, John held my hand since no one was about. How brown my hand was next to his, how lacking in repose.

Eventually I brought out my birth certificate and on it I saw that my mother’s name was Rosalia Agatha Maria Haberlin Wiederkehr and my father’s name Emil Jurg. They had christened me Aloysia Seraphina Irma. I was, Mama often told me, the second child, born to them one cold winter’s day on the fourth of January. Their first child, a boy, died in infancy and according to my mama, he had resembled a celestial being and was still among us, unseen to us, but not to her.

Many astrologers, according to my Aunt Lucy, the healer, thought it lucky to be born under Capricorn, but Mama, who loved being dramatic, said she had been filled with foreboding on that dark and gloomy afternoon, when the snow was falling heavily and the whole world was one dark and dismal hell. She had remembered her deep depression on my wedding day, when our train drew out of the little Altbad station and the sawmill had been whining and shrieking, cutting up that lovely pine of Uncle Max’s that had been struck by lightning. It was probably the wine Mama had drunk which had made her feel like that, since she was not truly a morbid woman.

I looked into the mirror again and saw that I had a blister on my lip, the effect of smoking my first few cigarettes. I had often been told that love made a woman beautiful. I had not noticed any change in me. My hair was as fine and flat as ever in spite of having been glamorized lately by the village barber. It had always been the despair of Mama, who



had never been able to discipline it, or later, to curl it into ringlets. 'Lyse, Lyse,' Mama would sigh, 'what are we going to do with you?' That was partly, too, the reason why I had entered the nunnery, where I had been looking forward to having my hair shaved off and my head covered for ever with a veil.

Outside there was a vista of a strange, almost hushed world, of fields and black sheep with white faces in them, and brown cows with black faces like masks. No houses anywhere, the meadows repeating their pattern over and over again like a theme by Bach.

I sadly wished Grandmama Martha were still alive and could have seen those wasted verges along the roads. There were apparently no gatherers of wild hay in England. While my mama's thoughts had often been far away with my celestial brother and the book she was writing for a publisher friend about the watch industry in the Jura, which required a great deal of research and chasing about from 'Pontius to Pilate', as she said, and which began to bore her long before it was finished, and failed to satisfy her because she felt that that kind of book was not creative, I spent much time with Grandmama, who was a very humble woman. She held me in her arms and made me feel safe. And now I had John I wished that I could tell her.

Grandmama had a cat, a ginger cat, whom she loved, and a dozen goats which she dressed in cast-off clothing when the temperature fell below zero. The cat's name was Persephone. We called her Perse. It was Grandpapa, who was a schoolmaster, who had named her thus. Being a schoolmaster in a tiny village school had made him very proud of his erudition. When Persephone died Grandmama and I wept bitterly. It seems strange now to think that, rushing in an express towards London, I was probably the only person alive on this earth to remember Persephone and the robin, Pheobus,



which came to the window every morning to eat out of Grandmama's hand.

The sun was setting and lit up the yellow lichen on the roofs of some farmhouses, which made me wonder if our future home would have yellow lichen too. The people in Altbad always removed it and many had a superstition about things growing on the tiles. Soon it was dark. I covered my face with my hands and said a little prayer. It was Angelus time. The bells would be ringing now at Sacred Heart.

Quite suddenly we were in London. Miles of ugliness lay behind us, and in a dark, wet, glistening street we found a hotel. John pushed me firmly ahead of him into a red-carpeted foyer, as dark as a tunnel. Gradually things became clearer, the white painted stairs, the misty looking-glasses, the narrow lift, the chilly bedroom, the not too clean pink satin eiderdown, the dusty-looking carpet, the two chairs each in a corner pushed out of the way, the gas fire. I was glad there was no bidet though as there had been in France. I opened the window wide and looked down into an ill-lit well and saw innumerable galvanized dustbins, buckets full of kitchen refuse and barrels of tar. Closing the window, I looked at John. He did not seem to notice his surroundings. He could have slept anywhere and eaten almost anything without complaining and I, who nearly became a nun, would once have had to use such ugliness and discomfort to clean my soul thereby.

But not any more. How worldly I had become in so short a time. It was John who was the unworldly one, able to rough it without, however, knowing it. One could not be angry with him for that. I wanted to stroke his hair and be maternal, and to forgive him unto seventy times seven, only I did not quite know for what.

## Chapter Six

THE following afternoon, nearing the Midlands, the train roared through a veritable kingdom of cowslips, where lofty elms and fantastic oaks with forked and twisted branches, alternated with miles of willow trees. No fruit trees anywhere, no mosaic of acres, only coarse grassland, gigantic meadows, miles of them. All the time my excitement grew. Soon we should be 'home'. John allowed me to chatter away and ask him the names of all the stations whizzing by. The speed we travelled was terrific. 'Husband,' I said to John, and suddenly I laughed. It seemed a funny word to me pronounced the Swiss way, and, to my ears, not very attractive.

'Hoos-band,' I repeated, and John smiled indulgently. It may all have been a little boring to him, but he never showed it.

Suddenly I saw the River Trent coiling its way drowsily through swampy green fields. So this was England. 'Engelland', the land of angels. Was that the meaning of its name? John did not know or care.

It was time to put on my coat and my bright red hat, a gay little hat with a long straight feather, which I had bought in Paris and which made me look, I imagined, what I wanted very much to look like, sophisticated, a woman of the world,

a woman of experience commanding respect from a new and materialistic world.

Then I saw John's father coming towards us out of the gloom of the railway station. I had once, when he was in Switzerland, caught a glimpse of him, as he and his wife stayed at the Hotel Belvedere in our village. I remembered his bushy eyebrows, that sunken emaciated face that looked as if he had never really laughed in his whole life. He appeared very distinguished in a double-breasted suit, black felt hat and elegantly rolled umbrella. I walked towards him indifferently, unsure whether I would have to kiss him. I never felt really sure about kissing people. It was an English custom I was told, one had to be brought up to it. A gale swept through the station yard blowing my hair awry. It was bitterly cold and I did not look my best. 'No kissing!' I said to myself with relief as we shook hands, and we talked about the weather as we drove in a taxi to John's home.

A dark drive led up to the house which stood well back from the road. John's mother, a tiny woman, always busy, according to John, with social affairs, stood under the lamp in the porch. She was about fifty, wore a grey tweed skirt and a hand-embroidered blouse. She blinked a little behind her glasses which seemed to magnify her eyes. Her fine silver hair was brushed up into a bun on top of her head. This was no longer the current fashion, but was still worn like that by royalty and many peasant women at home. She kissed me on my cheek and looked at me more closely as short-sighted people do. She remembered, she said, having seen me in Altbad once or twice.

'Yes,' I said, 'I remember you too.'

I was taken upstairs to change in her bedroom.

Even though in our home in the valley, as well as in almost every house, there was plenty of solidity and beauty created by artisans, I felt impressed by the deep buff carpets and the

tall brown velvet drapes, the brasses and the dark buff walls. It was as silent as in church and as impersonal as a cinema, with the deep curving staircase and gold-framed landscapes hanging above the banisters, portraying what looked like scenes from Siberia, frozen ponds with watery sunlight shining on them through leafless trees. The bedroom I was shown into was about as warm as a Swiss bath-house in February. From the window a queer sheen filtered through the branches of trees which grew close to the house.

Someone once told me that in suburban houses in England people sometimes suffered from a form of depression called 'the green sickness', which was not to be mistaken for *Weltschmerz*, but was an illness, I imagined, of the mind, caused by damp, too much greenery, too little sun and too little colour. It made people cold physically, as well as psychologically. I was all for bright things myself, even though brightness was not dignified and was said to lack distinction.

Nearly all the daylight was obliterated by an enormous dressing-table like a railway buffet. It was strewn with silver, cut-glass bottles with scent in them, trays with hairpins, and brushes with large initials engraved on them. An enormous double bed with faded blue curtains hanging on brass rails on either side set me wondering if that was where John was born. What wet rain, I thought, looking out upon the silent garden. A portrait of some ancestors hung above the bed, a couple, 'well bred people', their faces like masks, expressing nothing, neither joy nor sorrow, nor any hidden fire, not the kind of people who would make you feel at home, or I would wish to hang above my bed.

Mother joined me and saw me shudder with the chill that lay like a pall over the house. She offered me a cardigan which was too large for me and very unbecoming. I hoped she would ask me about home and my parents while we were

alone. I wanted to make some contact at once, but she led the way downstairs and showed me the house. The 'breakfast-room' from which a narrow french window opened upon the back garden and more greenery. I hugged the grey cardigan, wondering what it would all be like when the sun shone brightly. We inspected the kitchen, the scullery, the cook's pantry and the butler's pantry. There was no butler though. One complete shelf held innumerable medicine bottles, some filled with white, others with brown or green liquid. Mother quickly helped herself to a tablespoon of thick white medicine which she shook out of an enormous blue bottle. Then she turned to me and said, looking at me very closely, sighing a little, 'So you are John's wife!' There was nothing in that for me to reply to. She then told me what a good son he was and how she had planned wonderful things for him. There was nothing in this remark for me to answer either. Nodding and smiling amiably, I was longing to tell her how much I loved him and that I would make him as happy as was in my power, that to me he was the dearest, gentlest person I had ever known. But there was something about Mother which made it impossible to say it.

We came to the dining-room. John's father was standing with his back to the fire. There was also a clergyman and two elderly women sitting side by side on a sofa, who held out their hands saying 'How-d'ye-do.' John stood beside me and pressed my arm. Then we all sat down to dinner. The meal was simple enough. A great deal of cutlery lay on either side of my plate, far more than was needed in the end. Silver shone and reflected in the cut glass that was everywhere, on the table, on the sideboard, above which hung the portrait of a gentleman holding a book in his hand. He looked prosperous and not easy-going like my papa.

Someone asked me had we had a good journey and had we gone up the Eiffel Tower. I looked at one and then another

when I replied. Their eyes were blue, which looked rather cold, as if they were alarmed when they did not understand my pronunciation. Father, as he sipped his wine, stared at me rather and I immediately disliked him very much. I knew this was a sin, which made me feel guilty as well as anxious, which did not help me very much. It was none too easy for a girl with other notions of etiquette to understand the nice conduct of four knives and four forks and only three courses. It needed experience and ease. So this was John's background, I thought, so very grim and gloomy. As he smiled at me across the table I felt that he could not possibly have belonged to these people at any time.

What, I wondered, was this stout clergyman doing here? Was he too a relation? On his watch-chain, resting on his stomach, hung a large silver crucifix. There was this florid woman they called Aunt Ethel, and a Mrs. Hemmingway. They wore very drab clothes and lisle stockings. It made me wonder if my tomato-coloured frock was too loud for the occasion. In spite of John, I felt suddenly alone. I suffered. But having very nearly become a nun, I felt that I could bear it. Suddenly, Mrs. Hemmingway burst out laughing rather loudly, which made me wonder if it was because of me. I had always been the easiest thing to be laughed at, anyway.

Every woman in the room wore at least two diamond rings and expensive-looking brooches. Even Father wore a diamond ring on his little finger and a tie-pin with a pearl in it. Behind him, by the sideboard, stood a young maid and when she caught my eye I smiled at her. Mother caught her smiling back and raised her eyebrows. In the looking-glass, which hung above the fireplace, I saw my face looking very pale. If only Grandmama could see me now, I kept on thinking. Grandmama with her one-horse place, who was rather poor, so when she died there was only the cottage left and an acre or so of ground and about three hundred francs in the

bank. She was lucky though in her children. They had done pretty well for themselves and would not bemoan the fact that trade was bad as John's father had been doing now right through the dinner.

The two aunts, or whatever they were, kept on looking at me which was not very comforting. Everything was going differently from what I had expected. I felt I had now seen all I wanted of John's family and wished to go away. The reverend gentleman was talking about a church supper for which Mother was to supply and cook several chickens, saying that the organ fund was fifty pounds short. I kept wondering what his denomination was. Perhaps he was a Baptist. My grandmama had never cared for Protestants, saying they were as dull as mud. But then God only knew what these people round the table would have thought of her.

Dinner came to an end at last. We rose and I was glad to have John by my side. 'I'm tired of this,' I whispered in his ear. 'I don't think I can stand it any longer.' 'It won't be for long,' he whispered back. And so we went into the drawing-room, but the men stayed behind, which seemed a little odd to me.

On the way, I caught a glimpse of the garden. It had the quality of a dream. Daffodils glowed like tiny lamps in the moonlight. 'Nice, isn't it?' said Mother, who stopped at my side. 'You don't have gardens like that in your country, do you?' I did not know what to say to that, short of an argument. My mind went back to Mama's garden which, small though it was, was a mass of roses, lilies and forget-me-nots. Even Grandmama's field, sickly though it was in patches where the cows had churned it into mud, was a mass of primulas, and later, autumn crocus. Poppies too, and cornflowers. But these were not truly cultivated and nothing to be proud of.

The women fell to talking how bad the times were and

the price of coal, and how so-and-so had to close down and dismantle his machines. Then they spoke about the weather, how cold it was for the time of year, but that the rain would do a lot of good, and Mother told me how she had furnished Number Twelve on the avenue for us, and Aunt Ethel said did I not think it was very kind of Mother. For another quarter of an hour we all sat side by side, facing the fire, like so many hens sitting on their perches.

'And what's your Christian name?' asked Mrs. Hemmingway suddenly in a booming voice.

'Aloysia Seraphina,' I said. 'Lyse for short.'

'Oh,' was all she said, smiling a little to herself.

I grew so uneasy I could hardly sit still. There was a great deal to be said for filling every moment like this with silent prayers as the sisters did. I could not stop yawning now, even though I had been sipping English coffee, which was strangely thin.

Still nothing much was said. It made me feel ill at ease to be left so long with idle hands. Mother seemed tremendously restless too, ringing for the maid twice, rearranging the ornaments on the mantelshelf, turning to me saying that she was told Swiss women were tremendous homemakers, was it true. I thought of Mama who was different from the common run, who was not only beautiful, but had a mass of hobbies; so much so that she seemed to forget about having a husband or a daughter. Mama played the harp, painted pictures, wrote, and often left me to do the chores. My aunts, though, believed it their duty to fetch their husband's slippers when they came home, and to wait on them hand and foot, and envied my mama for being able to get away with it.

Aunt Ethel inquired where exactly I had lived, and when I told her, she said she had never heard of the place.

'Come nearer the fire,' said Mother, since I began to



shiver again. She fetched a screen and opened it against the bay window from where a noticeable draught came oozing in. I could now barely hide my yawns and noticed that my nose was turning red and my eyes began to water. I eyed the portraits on the wall while the three women talked about themselves and their families. When I was a child, I had so often been alone that I found it completely normal at all times to slip away until it was easy to imagine that I was the only living person in the whole wide world. Even now, in this strange green room with the three severe-looking women, I was suddenly away, back in a secret place on the alp, where I would sit for hours watching the *Lämmergeier* spying out the land, looking for my grandmama's sheep, with their Italian aquiline noses, capering about, swinging their pendant ears and their flabby dewlaps, which were so different from the ones I had seen on the English fields the day before. The painting on the wall too, a stream among some birches, reminded me of the garrulous rock pipits as they were hovering over the water. Once more I looked at the three women, who had shown so little interest in me, and shown so little welcome, that I felt the joy of being on my honeymoon dissolve within me.

At last the men joined us again. The clergyman, saying good-bye, asking me to come to his church, which was quite near, and Mother saying yes, she would take me, leaving me to wonder again what denomination he belonged to. John's eyes met mine and soon after that we left for our future home. With quite a load of worry in my heart I said good night to everybody.

'Tell me, John,' I said as he helped me into my coat, 'am I right in thinking that I am not really welcome and people here don't like the Swiss?'

'Dear me, no,' said John, 'you don't have to think that, this is just their way.'

## Chapter Seven

MOTHER, who had prepared this home for us a stone's throw from where she lived, turned on the light by her gate and saw us out into the night. There had been no apparent affection shown between parents and son. This too was probably their way. We were given some last minute advice though. We were to take her milkman, and her butcher would call for orders, we were to be sure to do this and that.

It had been a long day. We walked out into the darkness, John carrying my dressing-case. Several town clocks far away struck ten. There was no need to speak. John's arm drew me closer and I thought of sleep in a strange room which would now be my home.

'Poor Lyzz,' said John, 'it was not very nice for you. Buck up little thing,' he added, and then we were almost there.

We came to a lamp post which stood above a rusty green gate on which it said The Pines. We stepped up on to an overgrown garden path, which was littered with fallen ivy leaves. The house was tall, and seemed taller still towering in darkness. There was no one there, yet it felt as though some unseen hands were opening the door for us, leading us in. It

was more like a story told me about something that happened to someone else a long time ago.

John shut the green-front door with a bang, found the switch and a naked bulb lit up an entrance hall with a red tiled floor and dark papered walls, imitating panelling. I stood for a minute against the damp cold wall, breathing in the musty air, listening intently, for sounds came through the walls from some phantom people who evidently lived on the other side, someone shouting, someone slamming a door, a chair being moved.

‘What’s the matter, Lyseli?’ said John.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘can’t you hear it, there are people somewhere in the house.’

• John laughed. He said the house was semi-detached and that I was to come and sit by the fire which someone had lit for us and was still smouldering in the hearth. He added, ‘Welcome home,’ and then helped me out of my damp coat. I took off my red hat and saw that the feather had flopped down over the brim with damp, and suddenly I wept. John had gone into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee for me and while he filled a kettle I quickly dried my eyes.

On a buff wall in front of me hung some still-lives, painted by John’s father when he was young, also an engraving of the River Trent with a Norman church in the distance and two swans floating down the stream. There were other pictures too, of meadows with willows on them, of heather-covered hills. They had all come from some large Victorian home John’s family had once owned, the house in which he was born. John sat down beside me on a chintz-covered sofa which pinged loudly as he sank down deeply among some broken springs. I laughed and cried a little too. We both laughed and when John asked me was I happy, I said, ‘Yes, I’m only very tired now.’

We went up a steeply narrow staircase and John lit a large

gas fire in a large bedroom where some iron bedsteads were still piled against a wall which was papered with bright pink paper. We had to make ourselves busy. Feeling wakeful again I stood inside the iron frames while John lifted the heavy ends, holding them for me to fit the wire mattresses into the slots at either side. Never before had I seen such strange and primitive beds.

A long narrow hall ran right through the middle of the house. The dining-room door was clicking back and forth in a draught and when I opened it John peeped over my shoulders. There was not a thing to say. On the mantelpiece stood an ostrich egg and a cracked china tankard on which the name Harry was engraved, also a pale water-colour painted by a maiden aunt very long ago. Some poker work, a tray made by the same aunt, stood upright on a side-board. It made me think of all the people, the strangers, who had had a hand in the unwanted things which were now piled up in our house, and I wondered what had happened to them all. The rooms were full of someone's memories. Memories in every corner accosted me, but John did not feel like me in the least. He did not think that there should be an angel standing on a pedestal made of cold dead marble added to the rest. He merely asked where I had got my imagination from! John, thank goodness, did not, like me, feel detached from himself, if not disembodied, when in strange places, dark streets or silent houses. He was a very normal man and very easily contented. He was whistling merrily and it made me feel glad to see him so happy, and actually quite established in this dreadful house.

Some day, I thought, as I gazed at the dark brown velvet curtains which John had drawn, I will make this place really friendly, give it personality. Books were piled high in bundles in a corner of the room, three New Testaments, some school prizes given to John for mathematics and history,

both subjects I was no good at myself. Perhaps I should be able to make John love poetry one day. Mama had given me volumes of Rilke, Byron, and Baudelaire.

On the top floor, going down another long, dark passage, opening doors here and there, I could not help thinking that nationalities did not merely differ because of language, but because of the houses' they lived in. Well, I would make no pronouncement hastily, but John awaited the verdict. Did I like the place? Just then I wanted to mother him and tell him that I would soon get to love the house and all there was in it. Besides, there was plenty of homely stuff inside those boxes, which had come from home, painted crockery, embroidered cloths.

And so we went to bed in our strange brass bed with the slightly rattling knobs, opened the window wide and breathed in the city air, moist and slightly laden with fumes. Far away on some siding a train was shunting all through the night, apparently. I put my head on John's shoulder. When you were two it seemed easier to travel ahead into the darkness.

## Chapter Eight

ENGLAND ! I said to myself once more, feeling a little awed as I awoke in the morning and looked out upon a lime tree, which seemed to spread a bright green cover over the little front lawn. Some gulls or wild pigeons, it seemed, came reconnoitring to see what there was to find among these suburban houses, more or less identical.

When John left I had the whole day to myself. This was a novel thing for me, for up to now I had always something definite to do. Nothing at all happened. There was an empty field behind the garden wall at the back, a vacant plot full of dandelions. To me there was a strange kind of absence about the neighbourhood, everyone fenced in with hedges, and inside the kitchen or in any other downstairs room I could no longer see the sky. The downspout of the lavatory was leaking merrily into an overflowing gutter in the yard. A dark larder, like a hermit's cave, was filled with cans of food John's mother had presented us with. But I had never opened a can or eaten anything out of a tin before.

Two back bedrooms, with their lace curtains drawn, lined with multi-coloured paper, seemed slightly inimical even now in the morning. The attic needed clearing of old curtains and a pile of letters heaped in the centre of the floor which were

plastered with dust. They were love letters written to an unknown girl, but very ordinary ones. The young man who wrote them voiced no sentiments at all. It must be true what I had suspected, that the English were almost completely inarticulate when in love.

Dear Emily, can you meet me on Saturday evening at the usual place? It was fun the other day, wasn't it? I found your comb on the sofa behind the cushion after you left. Well, until Saturday. I hope you will be able to make it. Love, George.

Another letter ended in a plea for forgiveness, asking that she should not think him an 'utter cad'. He should, I felt, have told her that her voice was like music to his ears and he longed to have her in his arms again. But then John did not write like that either and if the *Bon Dieu* had seen fit to make Englishmen like that, I should have the wisdom not to try and change them.

There was another dreary iron bed in the other attic room and a yellow chest of drawers with a swivel mirror standing on top, covered with dust. There was in this a close dark atmosphere and a hint of *revenants*. Suddenly, rather nervously, I ran down the carpetless stairs as though pursued, and went out into the garden again. In the shed I found some rusty garden tools lying at the back, where it was festooned with cobwebs. There was a rake and a large and very heavy spade, and something to clip hedges with. Up some steep and tricky steps there lay the back garden, which had been freshly seeded with grass. It looked as though the tiny patch of lawn was growing bright green whiskers as fine as silk. I liked the garden in the front much better. The sun was out and a lawn full of daisies lay under the speckled shadow spread by the lime tree, the branches dipping downwards like so many

kindly hands. Fungus grew up the stems of the rose trees trained up an ugly, too tall pergola, where bright red rose-buds were bridged with dew-wet cobwebs. It was enchanting, reminding me momentarily of Grandmama, her glade and Persephone. For no reason at all it was as though she were calling me by my name, Lyse, Lyse, saying as she often did that everything had only so much value as you were prepared to give it. I would value everything as much as I could, I would have to. I wanted desperately to be truly at home in England and to belong.

Outside on the pavement, small boys were playing football, shouting 'Ready' and 'Tes', or some such words. But all the morning it was as though Grandmama were with me there inside the empty house, helping me to make the place a little more like home.

The breath of the whole of England seemed to sigh down my chimney and disturb the ash of last night's fire. Now I began to notice dust and particles of soot everywhere. I had never laid an open fire before and had to try three times before it would light. I discovered how much there was to find out about running an English home, making acquaintance too with what else there was in the corners.

I took all the pictures from the walls and hung up my own. Over the mantelpiece I fastened a copy of a Virgin, a passionate woman apparently by the Italian Michelangelo, and as I put the picture straight I spoke to her and said, 'I hope you do not mind.' I had a cousin, who had emigrated to Mexico, who had given it to me. He had written that Mexico was, to him, like heaven, and all sorts of marvellous things happened to him there every day. I truly hoped that some day I would be able to say the same about England, and, like my grandmama, who belatedly married this poor schoolmaster and was obliged to work on the fields in order



to make ends meet, establish harmony between all my dreams and reality. When Mama was upset with me over marrying away from home, and for 'Love' alone, she said that I took after Grandmama as, like her, I was quite unable to tell on which side my bread was buttered. Perhaps Mama was right. She would never have put up with someone else's strange bleak house in a strange environment.

I sat down by the french window for a while and listened to the sounds. Doors were opened and shut in the house next door, a pipe was knocked out against the fireplace behind the wall. Starlings shuffled and strutted on the lawn, stabbing the ground for worms, just the same as at home. 'And how came you here?' I wanted to ask them. But they were as much at home here as a very fat lady walking past the gate with a shopping basket.

I unpacked my books. I had always read copiously, insatiably. With my parents, too, books had been the centre of things, had often been read aloud by Mama on Sunday afternoons. Beautiful sad books most of them were, poems by Heine, by Byron and by Liliencron. I sat down on the sofa, forgetting the time, leafing through one book after another, floating away into a world of romance and depression, since poets in every language invariably harped on death.

As usual ordinariness would return though. I hung up a picture of Mont Blanc and put William Tell upon the mantelpiece. It was made of bronze and was very commonplace. But the picture I was most proud of was a painting of myself when seven. It was done by an Englishman who had walked into my grandmama's glade one day thirteen years ago and offered to buy a tiny plot of land she had for sale. It was right in the wood where in the spring thousands of birds made it glad with their everlasting songs. The Englishman had fallen in love with the place and built a tiny

bungalow on it. Later, he was joined by another Englishman, a writer, and together, every evening at six o'clock, they knocked at Grandmama's barn door, to get their goat's milk, of which they drank gallons.\* One day, the painter, Robert, painted my portrait, saying he loved Swiss children, they looked so very grave. He painted me sitting by the window with Perse on my lap and the geranium on the window-sill. These two men were always gently kind and generous. They supplied me with that first impression of the English gentleman, the kind of man I hoped one day to marry. Even Persephone, this enormous speckled cat, full of knowledge and great wisdom, accepted them almost at once.

Looking at the painting, I again floated into the past, remembering the giant ferns dropping their golden spores into Grandmama's pond. Grandmama often told me not to go near the water after dark, not because she thought that I might fall in, but because she was sure the devil walked in that wood. When I told Mama, she shrugged her pretty shoulders and said she was sure Grandmama would know.

It seemed an endless morning without John. The city drew me like a magnet. From the attic window it had a yellow sheen, the sun trying to break through a smoky haze. Motor-cars were whizzing along the main road far away in a constant stream. I opened the window wide. Sounds made of innumerable things rose from afar, expressing to me the mystery that was John's birthplace.

I put on my bright red hat, from which I had removed the feather, and took the tram which stopped outside the gate. I was walking on air. No one cared where I was going, only the conductor wanted to know. 'Where to?' he asked, and I said, 'To the centre, if you please.' The conductor lingered a little by my side and then he said, 'And does your mother know that you are out all alone?' I stared at him for a

moment or two, wondering how he guessed I had been under Mama's thumb all my life, until it dawned on me that this was a joke and his way of being friendly. I smiled at him as I left the tram and when it turned the corner by an open market the conductor waved to me. I waved back and then I was shocked at having made myself cheap and hoped John's mother had not seen me.

Wherever I went, thousands of people walked the streets quite unhurriedly, apparently filling endless vacant hours, like myself, looking at shop windows. In a dusty-looking little shop I bought some bread. The loaf looked most attractive, but I could tell that it was soft and underbaked as I put it in my basket.

Walking through the market was terribly exciting. Oh, to be part of a bustling city! To be part of a kingdom and, presently, to have a vote in it seemed more exciting still. In the heart of the market were the flower stalls. Never had I seen such blooms, except in the alps in spring. Those canterbury bells, those scarlet anemones, and oh! those roses, all of them larger and better than life, all of them apparently improved, doubled and hybridized. The scent of them! I bought a basket full of scarlet geraniums, as much as I could carry, and went out into the street again, where everything seemed greyer than before. Even so, swallows and martins nipped about between tall dark buildings, making me wonder where their breeding places were. Standing motionless on the pavement watching them high above me, caused other people to stare at me and to stare up into the sky as well, so, blushing, I went to find the bus stop and hastened back home to plant the geraniums before John came back.

Oh, what a queer funny garden it was. A long narrow strip fenced in with tall privet hedges and hidden away by trees. The geraniums gave it life. I felt as though, for the

first time, I had created something of my own, for after all it was rather wonderful for a girl to be able to make her own decisions at last. To be a married woman.

It was quite early yet when Mother called. She wore thick tweeds which bulged at the knees as well as across her seat. John had told me that his mother was really a very kind woman, who loved her family and only wished to dictate to them for their own happiness. We went into the kitchen, for she wanted to show me how to make a 'decent' cup of tea, which reminded me of my grandmama, who used to count the tea leaves. Then we sat opposite each other by the french window, looking out upon the flaming tapestry my geraniums made, watching the fat city sparrows making an awful din in the branches of the lime tree. Mother, who sat stiffly upright, said that she thought it was a great pity to have bought all these expensive geraniums since they clashed with every other flower in the garden—that I should have asked her before embarking upon such an enterprise. I remained silent. After all, it was her garden and her house. It was true too, they fairly killed the pansies, the handful of wallflowers, the pale mauve anaemic tulips and the washed-out meagre lilac. I decided I would not pull them up though, I would be glad for the magic of their colour when all else was dull and the summer nearly over.

We talked a little of Mother's headaches, her blood pressure, her rheumatism and her recent colitis. Mother also remarked that I should go to a Miss Goldsmith for lessons in English and elocution, that it was tremendously important not to have an accent, foreign or otherwise. To speak English well and properly was the first and most important thing for me to tackle. She felt sure I would make a great effort because 'you see, we can't pretend to be very happy for John to have married a foreign girl. Don't misunderstand

me,' she went on hastily, 'we have nothing against you personally and we know that John never cared for any other girl, but, well, it is rather a handicap for an Englishman to have a foreign wife.' I turned this over in my mind. True, I had never made the faintest pretensions to being any but a simple middle-class girl, but now I was beginning to feel an alien as well.

Mother said she would come in again in the morning to go through my wardrobe to see if I had all that was needed in this country. Just as she was about to go and shut the door behind her, she came back into the room and scanned the walls, saw the Virgin, the William Tell, and wanted to know where Father's still-lives were, and that wedding present from Mrs. Hemmingway, the River Trent with the Norman church, and the swans in black and white. They were leaning against the wall. Mother started talking about her husband and what a clever painter he was, and about her relations at this end of the town and Mrs. Hemmingway at the other end of the town, and what important positions they held, and so on, begging me earnestly to put them back again so as not to hurt their feelings.

## Chapter Nine

NEXT morning I sprang from my brass bed and my hard British unsprung mattress and rushed down into the kitchen, to see who was making all that noise. It was Mrs. Hall, Mother's washerwoman. She said, 'Good morn' Ma'am,' hung her coat on the china knob of the kitchen cupboard and put her hat next to the alarum-clock on the mantelshelf and asked for the laundry. I fetched my new lawn nightgowns with the Swiss embroidery on them, John's socks and pyjamas, his shirts, which he had bundled into a dark cupboard housing a gas meter, and rather reluctantly gave them to the woman. 'You go to sleep again, Ma'am,' she said, 'I'll soon get this stuff done.'

She pushed all but the socks into a pot-bellied copper, went out to the shed to chop some wood, brought in a bucket of coal and lit a fire underneath it. Billows of smoke filled the house. Mrs. Hall went down on her knees and blew hard for several minutes, made herself a pot of tea, stirred the washing round with a wooden spoon and then splashed the lot into the sink, rinsed them and mangled them with an enormous wooden mangle which stood near the gas stove, hung them out between the apple trees in the back garden, trampling down the young grass, made another pot of tea,

had a plate of chops and vegetables, which I hastily prepared, fetched in the washing still wet, quickly ironed it on the kitchen table, hung it on a pulley, which was attached to the ceiling, and said this would be seven shillings please. I liked Mrs. Hall in spite of her slap-dash ways. She had not only called me 'Ma'am', but 'Dear' and 'Ducky' and did not apparently think of me as an alien at all. She took me as I was.

I looked at the washing steaming on the pulley in front of the blazing kitchen range, was shocked at the yellowing look of my nightgowns, and felt convinced that never before had I seen washing done so cheerfully and so fast. It made me feel guilty. What would Mama say if she saw my linen. It had cost her a great deal of money and most of my things had been sewn and embroidered by hand. At home I would never have dared to hang this washing out. But here the neighbours would not care, nor would they notice. There was, it seemed, another freedom here we in our village had not got.

In the afternoon Mother called again. She did not ring the bell, but walked in through the yard into the open kitchen door. The washing had now ceased to steam. Mother examined John's vests and underpants, which were hanging on the pulley. She wanted to see if he were wearing the proper things. She told me what to put out for him in the summer, which shirts he was to wear in winter, and to be sure to put moth balls among his woollies.

We went upstairs. As we walked into the bedroom the brass knobs tinkled slightly, which made me want to laugh out loud. Perhaps I felt a little bit hysterical. Without asking my leave Mother opened the wardrobe door. I reckoned everything I had brought with me would be a pleasant surprise for her, but it was not. Mother had her feet firmly on the ground. She was the kind, you could tell, who had plenty of self-confidence. Nothing had seemed to me so lovely as my trousseau, those hand-woven sheets tied with blue rib-

bon, everything good and solid, and there was no frivolity about my underclothes. There was some peasant crockery too, with verses on the rims of plates, and rosebuds in the teacups, everything quite different from what Mother had ever seen before. There were two dozen bloomers too, made of lawn, as well as nightgowns trimmed with bows, rosebuds and monograms encircled with leaves.

Some of my frocks had been made at home by the barber's wife, and others had been sent from Paris. Mother held them at arm's length one by one and somehow brought it home to me that we did not have a common background. My trousseau was the standard type of any girl from Altbad and I loved every stitch of it. I had lovingly handled every item again and again. They were part of my great romance. But Mother did not think that they were right for England. 'Believe me,' she said, 'I know.'

When Mother finally settled on the things I was to wear and those I was not to wear, and had given me a little lecture on 'good taste', as shown in her own rather shapeless dresses, I began to wonder if this was now the end of bridal rapture and the beginning of adult living.

'You might send some of these frocks home again,' said Mother, 'perhaps one of your sisters could wear them there.'

'I have no sisters,' I said.

'Are you an only child?'

'Yes, but I had a brother once, he died when he was little, God rest his soul.'

'Is yours a healthy family?' she asked, wondering a little at my lack of colour.

'Oh, yes,' I cried, 'my forefathers all lived to be eighty except for one of my grandfathers, Martha's husband, the schoolmaster, who died young because he was kicked by a cow.'

On the pile lying on the chairs were my blue velvet



costume and my two pink and yellow evening gowns. Mama had packed them with much care. She had also put cachets of lavender among my underclothes, which Mother was now inspecting. She picked up a pair of lawn bloomers, trimmed with Swiss embroidery, saying, 'Good gracious, do you still wear this sort of thing in your country? And what's in all these packets?' she wanted to know. My Aunt Lucy, the herbalist, had given them to me. 'Those are herbs, cat's tails for kidney trouble, camomile for liver trouble, mint and blackberry leaves in case of pregnancy.' She turned and stared at me. 'You're not?' she said, raising her eyebrows. I stood up very primly and stiffly and closed my eyes, wishing to God I were sophisticated.

Presently, my trinket box was examined too, my humble jewellery, the pink amethyst, the golden cross with the inset pearls and the photograph of Mama, looking very self-assured and a little haughty.

'Is this your mother?' she asked, and I nodded proudly. Anyone could have been proud of her. I still stood at Mother's side, almost at attention, staring at nothing in particular, everything a blur.

'You see,' she said, 'we in England dress very quietly indeed and more or less alike. Foreign clothes seem to us eccentric and often very unbecoming, if not downright vulgar.' There was quite a clan among her friends, about half a dozen families who used the same dressmakers. No one could deny but that their clothes were in perfect taste. She would take me to town in the morning, where she would get me some frocks, underpants and all.

'Surely,' she added, when she saw my face, 'you would want to adapt yourself for the sake of John.'

## Chapter Ten

THE following afternoon, among the gilded walls of the Oriental Café, where Mother was evidently in the habit of taking a cup of coffee and an éclair with artificial cream, I also met some of her sisters and friends. John said there were so many relations in the town they were like a syndicate. Like Mother, her sisters were little women with tiny feet, size three, large busts and no hips at all. All their clothes were uncommonly alike, not of any given time. I felt as though I were intruding, for they were telling tales of woe of which there seemed no end, of their children's measles, their swollen glands and adenoids.

They were also talking of a coming wedding of one of their nephews, to which half the town had been invited. 'Oh, I do love weddings,' I said, thinking of the jolly fiestas weddings were at home, with play-acting, charades and dancing through the night. As soon as I said it I blushed. Perhaps they did not mean to ask me, or did not think it necessary since I had only just arrived. And when they changed the subject I was glad I had not brought those little gifts with me I was going to give them, the wooden and ivory carvings, the scent, the little painted statuettes of saints and the Lion of Lucerne carved in ebony. Besides, I had already noticed

there were plenty of lions dotted here and there portraying British might, and as for saints, they did not really care for them. Unless, it seemed, St. George, the one with the dragon, who was so popular everywhere all over the world because he was a hero and did not suffer the ordinary martyrdom of meeker saints however virtuous and brave.

Aunt Dorothy showed her sisters the swollen fingers on her right hand, saying it was gout and very painful. Imagining that it might comfort her, and hoping to become one of them, I told her that one of my aunts suffered likewise, but that she was getting better all the time.

‘There is such a thing,’ Aunt Dorothy said, ‘as a poor man’s gout, the cause of which is completely different.’

• It must be true, I could not help thinking. My Aunt Marie lived very humbly and passed through life like a little shadow. She lived in a little third floor flat among hundreds of her kind and when her fingers ached nobody noticed it, least of all her husband. She lived like a dun-coloured little hen and the reasons for her gout may well have been quite different.

Mother took me to a shop to buy me some pink Celanese underpants with machine-made lace on them. They were to replace my hand-embroidered bloomers which were so out of fashion and would never be white again once Mrs. Hall had washed them in that copper.

I wrote to Mama and did not know what to say. It seemed always best to write the kind of letter which said nothing at all.

We have blackbirds in our garden, they sing outside my bedroom window, sitting on the *lindenbaum*. There are many such trees on our avenue over seventy years old. Large fat sparrows, and starlings too, wait for me

outside the kitchen door to shake the table-cloth. There are seven rose trees along the garden path. The house is truly quaint, very tall and narrow, attached to another similar house. All the houses on this road are exactly alike, like gravestones surrounded with evergreen fences six feet high.

John's mother is good to me and buys me many things she thinks I need, living here. I love the tiny red roses which grow up a tall pergola, but my special flower is the geranium, which I've planted myself. I feel that England needs some colour. I bought them in a flower market, the like of which I've never seen. I wanted to buy and touch them all, the roses, the most perfect blooms, grown, it seems, by the most solemn characters in shabby clothes and dirty cloth caps. All my days are still like a dream, melting away as if they had not been.

When John came home from work, he asked me how I had got on with Mother and the aunts. 'They hardly spoke to me,' I said, and John pointed out once more that this was just their way. 'But Mother laughed at my pretty drawers,' I replied and suddenly I burst into tears. But I soon pulled myself together when, almost for the very first time, I heard John laughing well and loud.

## Chapter Eleven

JUST as it had done at home my bedroom faced east, and the sun searched me out when I was still in bed. John had risen ages ago. He was the kind of Englishman, rare apparently, who awoke feeling fresh and on top of the world at six-thirty every morning. My first Sunday in England! No brass band, no choirs, no gymnasts marching down the street off to a contest, no skiers catching the early train. The whole town was asleep. John, however, wearing the most awful clothes, was chopping firewood again, his favourite occupation, without giving a thought to his still sleeping neighbours. I looked lazily round the room and then I remembered. Mother had rung up the night before telling me to go to church with her. She would not take no for an answer.

There she was already standing on the garden path talking to John about the geraniums. She wore a large tall hat, balancing it almost on top of her upswept hair. It was an expensive hat and had four egrets on it standing right out on either side. On her arm she had her enormous handbag inside which, John said, she always carried wads of pound notes, probably fifty or sixty of them, and was inclined to shed one or two when looking for some pills or a pencil or a bus ticket, dropping them on the floor.

I did not really want to go to church with her and should have told her. But what was a young girl, an alien, to do? I hastened into my dove-grey suit and together we walked to town, through the little glade,<sup>3</sup> Lime Tree Avenue.

I had heard quite a lot about the habits of Englishmen from Herr Meier, the owner of the Hotel Seestern which gazed across the Lake of Constance to Germany, where the sun set most dramatically almost every night colouring the water red, making everybody think of an early death according to the song. Herr Meier said Englishmen were crazy about fresh air and having a daily bath. He also said that all the women were slim like willows and the men were invariably tall. Walking through the still silent town I found no bedroom windows open anywhere, and Mother, walking at my side, was almost fat.

I wanted to tell her that in future I would not be able to go to church with her, but Mother was a chatty woman and did not give me a chance. Almost all the way she was telling me how to take care of John as though he were an invalid and needed coddling. While she talked sparrows were twittering in the gutters, a thrush was singing as though it was just as happy in a city as elsewhere, and Saturday's newspapers were riding in the wind, clinging to the fences of large houses.

I wondered a little as we plodded along, being passed by buses taking elderly women to church, as Mother spoke about the arthritis she had in the neck, and how the chiropractor hurt her when he jerked her head from left to right every Thursday morning, why John had not stopped Mother calling for me. The trouble with him was that he was too courteous. He had been brought up to be like that towards women. Herr Meier told me that all Englishmen who had been to public schools were easily recognizable by their lovely manners. Would that, I wondered too, not be a

handicap to them in the long run when dealing with rougher elements? Mother was still chatting, but since I did not always understand what she was saying, she started speaking very loudly, pausing between each word. People were turning round thinking we were quarrelling. I felt tremendously embarrassed and not now in the mood for prayers.

When we finally reached the neighbourhood of the church Mother said that, by the way, she did not believe in the Virgin Mary and she rejected the idea of Hell, and as for the resurrection of the body, well, she did not believe in that either. But she did believe in a future state. I was glad of that. After all, one could not go to church for nothing. I was sure it would take me a little time to sort that out and throw Mother's faith into proper shape, when she said her conscience would not let her believe in anything that was not accurate. She had spent a holiday once in a continental village, where there was only a Roman church. She almost squirmed in her pew. 'I mean to say, after all, the age of miracles is gone.'

We passed the Wesleyan chapel again from where I had seen the Queen. All the shops were shuttered and there in the midst of warehouses and offices belonging to stocking and lace manufacturers, stood this venerable old church, neo-Gothic and renovated, as though it were forgotten and forsaken, which indeed it all but was, no longer making up dreams, withdrawn from the world. There were no young men standing in the forecourt to watch the girls go in. There was not a soul about. The bells were tinkling chattily while Mother and I tiptoed into the vast building.

In the three front benches sat a handful of souls, seven in all. Three old men and six choir boys stood waiting in beautifully carved stalls, and I, copying Mother, knelt down, and said a prayer. 'Oh God,' I prayed 'let them learn to like me and teach me not to mind too much if they don't.' It

was a long, long prayer apparently, for Mother nudged me impatiently, asking me to rise and sit by her side. The boys and the three old men were chanting now and Mother pressed a book into my hand. It was cold inside the church, even though it was a gentle day without. The light gleamed softly through the stained glass windows. For no reason at all I felt very sorry for Christ. In a world where there had been bitter wars, He seemed no longer the most passionate cause to give oneself up to. The seven people in the first three benches were now reciting the Creed, or part thereof. Mother, in a loud voice, proclaimed that she believed in God the Father and in Jesus Christ, but on most of the other points she kept silent. Perhaps her convictions came and went and turned about in her brain like a wheel. I felt, though, that I should not probe into Mother's faith, that it was her own secret. Nor should I probe into her private orisons either. But I could not help wondering, considering her own kind of convictions, which did not seem profound, why she made a fuss about anybody else's.

As the service was over and Mother pulled aside the heavy curtain by the door, we passed out into the market square. By the statue portraying Queen Victoria she said that we would now take the bus for home. I had a long look at the Queen sitting there on a throne, looking like a rock of strength, cutting a fine figure. I then turned round and said that I would now go to Mass at St. Mark's and would Mother come with me? Perhaps we did not understand each other, or it must have been a bitter blow to her, for she patiently explained to me that she and Father would not tolerate that any of her grandchildren should ever belong to a faith like mine. A dead pause ensued. I was almost struck with fascination at her remark. Unable to think of a reply, I turned away from her, saying that I was very sorry she felt like that. I could see that she seemed utterly disillusioned. I



left her standing there by the bus stop, not without pitying her, turning round once or twice seeing her still standing there, a very disappointed woman. I waved, but of course she could not see me.

The inside of St. Mark's was cool and very dark, and not in the least ornate as the churches were at home. No pink angels floating on the ceiling blowing golden trumpets. No one recognized me as a stranger, and no one passed me any holy water. Everywhere the pews were full, men and women mixed together, something you could not do in Altbad either. It was nice being able to pour out my soul without this strange woman, who was John's mother, at my side, reminding me that I was now a member of an alien family, who knew I was deluded and to whom, it seemed, I had a duty too. I thought of John, longing terribly for him to be at my side. Probably he did not believe in miracles either.

As I walked home, not hurrying, almost dragging my feet, raindrops splashed my face. They hit the asphalt paving and bounced off languidly. I thought of Marti, the boy next door, whom everybody expected me to marry, who had often walked from church with me. He would be surprised if he saw me now, alone, not much caring about the rain spattering my new suit. We used to catch dragon-flies together, which hovered over the Lido behind the Kurhaus. I should not now be thinking of him when John was waiting for me at The Pines to take me to dinner with his family. We would now always have our Sunday dinner there, so Mother said. It would be tomato soup, she added, and roast beef. The soup would be out of a tin and Father would be irritable, John had already told me. It was his Sunday mood. How drearily domesticated we were becoming so very soon.

Everybody was resting, this being Sunday, except those who were digging ditches or felling trees in their little gar-

dens, but most people, as far as I could see, were keeping still. Whether they were contemplating, no one could tell.

Dinner was served, a gong was beaten loud and hard. Mother told me it would be eaten cold on Monday and minced on Tuesday, and that on Wednesday there would be sausages, on Thursday chops, on Friday fish, and so on, week after week.

'No doubt you find us very old-fashioned,' she added, 'but this has always been the rule.'

'Oh, we are old-fashioned too, in a different way,' I said.

Drinking coffee in the drawing-room, Mother remarked that hers was a wonderful country, the best in the world. It had the highest living standards too. I nodded my head in gentle agreement, but remembered the unemployed sitting by the hundred in the market place. I watched the clock and wondered how soon we could politely take our leave.

Out in the garden John and his father were doing some weeding. How languidly they moved. Oh, John, I sighed, are we still the star-crossed couple we were but yesterday, and would all my Sundays be like this? Soon after coffee John's people went to sleep for the rest of the afternoon. 'Let's go for a walk,' I said, little knowing that there was absolutely nowhere to walk to.

One had to be calm and use pure reason to enjoy a walk into the outer suburbs. John tried very hard to adapt his steps to mine. Bending forward a little, he shoved me along gently with his hand on my elbow. How English he looked and how shabby. He would not wear his Sunday best either, as a Swiss would have done. His flannel jacket was patched at the elbows with leather as if he were a tramp. This was an English Sunday and, as such, to be lived through as though

one were already old and had finished with life. No amusements, no ski-ing, no swimming, no theatres, no opera. Several times on our way to a little stream, which lay in a patch of green between some slag heaps, I felt tempted to sit down in a hedge bottom to cry. Simply to cry; long and loud.

## Chapter Twelve

AT half past nine in the morning, when neighbouring children went to school, I climbed the lime tree to pick the blossoms. There was a sweetness to the soul among the branches of that lofty tree, among the sticky leaves and the scented blooms.

My neighbours, I imagined, must have been most important people going off to work so very late. The man in Number Eight was just kissing his wife good-bye in the doorway and when he saw me, he seemed annoyed. I already knew that English gentlemen did not like being seen when kissing. The man in Number Fourteen was also going off, wearing spats and a white carnation. Were they, I asked myself, working in those awful old buildings, those ancient ramshackle factories which sent those whirring sounds and that thick black smoke up to the Castle grounds and across those lovely parks, which were to compensate for all the dirt?

So far, I was a mass of goodwill and neighbourliness towards everyone on either side of The Pines but it was no use. For one thing the hedges were too high to see my neighbours properly, and for another, we had not yet been introduced. I could always smell them though when they

cooked their 'English joints' and boiled their cabbage, and I could hear them turning on their taps and calling in their barking dogs, who were burying their bones among my geraniums.

There also was the scenery. It was mostly pink, unless it rained, when it turned purple. This was caused by brick. Everything was brick and to me, a Swiss, houses left bare of stucco or whitewash looked naked and unfinished, especially the back of buildings where the brick was cheap. There was the flat pale sky and the smoke of hundreds of chimneys spiralling towards it. You could always tell from where the wind was blowing, which we could not do in Altbad or anywhere in our valley. These were some of the aspects of my new life which, I prayed, as I picked the blossoms, I would get used to by and by.

Quite unexpectedly, while I was sitting on the lime tree gathering some blossoms, strange beefy men arrived at my gate wheeling a large gas cooker up the garden path. Were these burly men with large red faces, wearing braces and cloth caps, Anglo-Saxons too? As I was climbing down from the tree, groping for the ladder, the men saw me, but instantly looked away. More men joined them, carrying a boiler. They were going to rip out the kitchen range in a day or two.

Mother arrived breathlessly, whipped off her hat with the egrets on it, and gave the men advice. Even though Mother was small, she must have filled those men's idea of what a duchess ought to be. They were all attention. I sat on a stool and watched. If they did not reply, she asked them sharply if they had heard. Just sitting there made me feel small and mean. There was nothing of the duchess about me. Besides, I was convinced that since I left the convent, my character had deteriorated. Gone was my charity. Was malice, I asked myself, forever ready to creep into human conscious-

ness? And had not the very saints, with all their practised love, been tempted thus?

Mother had a lovely skin, like rose-petals and ivory, her nose and chin were good, but the back of her head was prominent, which, according to Lavater's *Physiognomy*, a book my mama had at home and which was a hundred years old, meant a troublesome, fussy personality. It meant, so he wrote, a self-willed nature and an 'inclination to sinfulness pertaining to sex'. Shocked at such absurdity, I went to make some tea.

The tea was weak. You could see that the men thought so too. The burly fellow with the shoulders smiled at me when Mother turned her back. He winked. I did not know whether it was proper to wink back and blushed instead.

'No, no,' Mother shouted, 'don't put it there.' She rushed to get the tape measure from her handbag, pushed the heavy man aside and marked the wall with a pencil for them to see the exact spot where the cooker was to stand. The men with the boiler left to come another time. I sorted out the lime blossoms I had just picked, spread them on paper and put them in the sun on the window-sill to dry. Their scent filled the whole house. Mother wanted to know whatever I was doing with the stuff, and when I told her it would cure a fever anyone could see that she did not believe me.

Later, in the sitting-room, Mother fell to telling me about the awful cost of all that plumbing and how she really was not sure if she should have allowed all these alterations to be made. I said she should not have done it, that I was quite happy to watch that glowing forge the kitchen range when it rained outside. It made me think of Swiss bonfire night on the first of August, the fireworks, the drums and bugles and the glorious freedom of the Confederation which would soon be commemorated again.

'Yes, yes,' said Mother impatiently. She was tired after her

morning's work, letting herself down gently on our sofa. I felt sorry for Mother then. She meant so well. Her whole mind was entirely domesticated and I felt sure that there was a lot to be said for that. Feeling rather embarrassed by her generosity, I said that I hoped always to be able to pay my way in life. From the cupboard by the bookshelf, I took my papa's cheque and gave it to her. It was the greater part of my dowry. She looked at it for a moment or two, holding it close to her short-sighted eyes and, most casually, as if she did not quite trust the scrap of paper, or did not think much of the amount entailed, she dropped it in her handbag among her many notes, bus tickets, receipts and other odds and ends. Little did she know what it cost me, not just in cash but in a sense of freedom. 'Yes,' said Mother, 'trade is bad.' Then she gave me a great deal of advice. She said that one needed to make the best of things as they were and live according to one's means, explaining the best and cheapest way one could run a house, a way which I knew she had never tried. It was rather maddening. Still, it was better to listen politely than to tell her that you could not teach a Swiss economy. He knew a great deal more about it than an Englishman.

When Mother left, I made another pot of tea for the men and one of them said, 'French?'

I said, 'No, Swiss.'

The other man, old enough to be my grandfather, his face almost hidden inside the cooker, said, as though I were not there, 'Poor kid, she's a long way from home.' Then the men packed up and all was still again. A breeze fanned the curtains, a bluebottle hummed, a water tap turned on next door made our pipes hum in unison. I sat on the kitchen stool gazing at the grey boiler and my new gas stove and felt sorry about that cheque. It seemed a pity to have spent it in so humdrum a way. Some rose-petals dropped suddenly

from the vase on the window-sill and there was a terrible ache in my heart for home.

At breakfast, John raced through the paper without turning a hair, leaving it to me to absorb those awful headlines about unemployment and threat of war, murder and fatal diseases. Nothing but death and desolation met my eyes. There was, I thought, something to be said for employing reporters who had been to a university as the Swiss did, men who, like contemplatives, wrote learned solemn articles, subduing the reader it is true, but not shocking him. Even hours after John left I was still tiptoeing discreetly about the house, fearing to wake some evil spirits with untoward cheerfulness. But I could not leave those newspapers alone. They had a way of holding your attention.

However, my amiable workmen arrived to pull out the ancient kitchen range in order to put in this large grey boiler. Without uttering a single swear-word, or once calling upon the Deity, they went about their job. No homely Swiss exclamations flew about the place like '*Verdamnte Siech*' or '*Chaibe Luder*', which were such a help, apparently, to the smooth working of a job. Were even the workmen gentlemen in England? Always polite to their women? And did they never beat them?

I made them some coffee, but they said that they much preferred tea and they would rather make it themselves. Watching the large-fisted man handling the teapot, talking but sparingly to his mate in that curious English way, obligingly clearing the table for me afterwards, I wondered if their wives would not sometimes prefer them to treat them rough and show them who was boss? However, it would remain a mystery to me, until some day when I would have taken roots and ceased to be a mere spectator. There were very many Englands indeed.



This grey and sinister boiler, once installed, began to plague my life. It either roared away and burnt up tons of coal, made the water boil in the tank so that eventually the cold tank began to boil as well, overflowed down the bathroom floor and the kitchen ceiling, or else it went out. Every third day it had to be cleared of clinkers, stones and shale—by hand. The kitchen filled with dust, so did the hall, the banisters, the upper landing. It filled me with a sense of futility. Did English women really have to put up with things like this? What could they be thinking of, doing the work of a stoker so they could have the hot water to wash off the dirt which they collected while stoking?

The boiler was called Hercules. Every hour or so I went to stare moodily at the sulky grey horror, added more coal and watched the washing steaming on the rack, which Mrs. Hall had hung there, and which flapped wetly against my forehead.

There simply was no other choice for me but to live the British way and to accept placidly whatever happened. I told John so when he came home. He grinned. He thought it funny. He was odiously placid himself.

## Chapter Thirteen

I SIMPLY could not sum up Father. No more than he could sum me up. His name was Cyril, a romantic name. It was the only true romantic thing about him. Whenever I arrived on the scene and John was not with me, he adjusted his pince-nez, which was attached to his lapel by a thick silk cord, cast a suspicious glance at me, looked me up and down, inspected my hat, his eyes coming to rest on my legs and ankles, especially the latter, saying that in his opinion it was more important to have slim ankles than a pretty face. Not that my ankles were thick in any way, but they were the sturdy type, the kind that could walk for miles and did not stagger uncertainly on high-heeled shoes. 'I am glad,' I said, 'that my ankles are not as the hind-legs of a dog.' He also told me he firmly believed that a young man should sow his wild oats and not marry until that was well accomplished. When he explained what wild oats were, I said poor man, to him love was apparently only incidental, but to me and John it was eternal. At this he laughed long and loud while I stood there gaping like an idiot, being suddenly filled with an awful longing for the convent, which lay so far away now in the distant past that it seemed to belong to myth and fable.

I had also noticed that he was fond of remarking on the physical aspects of other women whom he did not like. Either their 'beams' were too wide, their necks too scraggy, or their features ill-assorted. His taste in women was the china-doll kind, blonde, thin and placid, the kind of girl who would be incapable of having any kind of mental crisis, because she would not have the mentality for one.

I turned my back on him and went into the drawing-room to strum the piano while Mother was cutting out some garments on the dining table which she wanted me to sew together for a church bazaar. I played a tune composed on the spur of the moment by myself. It was a heart-breaking tune full of deep sadness. The leitmotive was pure lament. Oh dear! I sighed, what could I do with a temperament like mine. Sometimes it was nearly killing me. Building up a most intricate structure, I enhanced my tune with many variations and all but lost it in a mist of chords and tremolos, thinking as I played that what I really needed, now I was out in that big wide world I had so longed for, was someone to tell me what I should live for. Surely one could not earn life eternal by doing nothing but cook a husband's dinner?

Presently I remembered the theme of my composition again and pulled it back from its dreamy heights and attacked it with renewed bitterness, when Father stood behind me pretending to be moaning like a dog. This was cruel of the old man and he knew it. He said he could not see what I could possibly be so miserable about and that he always thought the Swiss were purely mercenary and only interested in the tourist trade, of which he did not seem to have a high opinion. This annoyed me. It made me feel greatly misunderstood. After all, nobody could leave the village of her forefathers and walk about the streets of a strange town looking for something all the time, something that simply was not there, having to write a diary in despair,

without feeling depressed occasionally. Now Father dealt in lace for ladies' knickers and I could not see that this was less mercenary than the tourist trade, but did not mention it. Besides, I wanted to keep cool. As cool as he. I just stood there, dumb and oppressed.

Mother had finished her measuring and cutting six garments out of the material meant for four by letting in innumerable gussets. I began to sew. It was like being in the convent again. The stout old lady, Mrs. Hemmingway, sat on the red-plush sofa, seemingly making mental notes about me. I just said, 'How-do-you-do,' and showed no interest in her otherwise, patting myself on the back for having caught on at last how to make things easier for myself and to be 'ladylike'.

Later we had tea and as she bit into the sponge cake, I noticed that Mrs. Hemmingway's dentures were like those of a horse. Her eyes, when they met mine, reminded me of nitric acid. This was a cruel observation and most uncharitable. But lack of charity was catching, the same as love.

As if youth were not already sufficiently frustrated, Father started to talk about the lace trade and how he remembered another such crisis as now existed, which lasted for years, when almost all those in the trade died of starvation. I said if a slump had happened before, they should by now have learnt a thing or two about business and switched over to something else like the Swiss did. Father glared at me, but brushed this aside. In all fairness, I admitted to myself, it took a lot to make the English angry.

## Chapter Fourteen

HAVING nothing better to do, I went through John's trousseau. There was not very much of it I did not like his clothes, they did not seem to have the elegance of those our young men wore at home on Sunday afternoons. So I went to town with one of his best jackets over my arm. In the main street, I dodged Aunt Ethel, who always pretended she did not see me, but when I stopped to look at the window display of a shoe shop, I caught her turning round.

At the tailor's shop, I explained to the shop-walker that there was not enough padding in the shoulders. The young man seemed somewhat alarmed and looked slightly hurt. The cutter, who had his mouth full of pins, came along and raised his eyebrows. First one attendant came from a cubby-hole and then another, the manager, magnificently dressed, from upstairs. He too raised his eyebrows. I stopped speaking and faced them one after the other. There was such a to-do about so small a thing. They had made the suit only seven months ago. They had made similar suits for royalty and for an otherwise high-class clientele since eighteen hundred and seventy. However, they appeared to accept the challenge and asked me to leave the jacket. As I left, all of them stood and watched me go. What they must have thought of me, a very

young woman, foreign, dressed in a light blue velveteen suit, not very well cut either, I had no idea.

I liked walking through the streets of this famous Midland city. How graceful young girls were, how very pretty too. They did not wear those bulky tweeds that Mother wanted me to have. Perhaps, I wondered idly, John should have married one of them, a girl who would not be subdued by Mother and let anyone sap her confidence, because she would have a background nearer home.

At the counter of the fish shop, Aunt Ethel and I could not avoid each other. She gave me a fleeting little smile. 'I see you are buying salmon?' I nodded. 'I have to be satisfied with cod these days,' she added. 'I always say to my husband that cod has to do for us.' I vaguely wondered why, for by Altbad standards she was a very wealthy woman. I moved away, but did not dare to leave the shop without a polite good-bye to her. It had been rather a dismal encounter, for she had made me feel extravagant and very small. Trying, as I was taught, to have kind thoughts, I slowly walked back to The Pines.

## Chapter Fifteen

ALWAYS impatient to find out all about the country I was to spend my life in, I leant out of my bedroom window, listening to the bells of St. Andrew's, which had been ringing for ten minutes already. This was for one of John's cousin's wedding and I was wearing my blue dress, the only one Mother liked. She was going to call for me any minute now. To my right, as far as I could see, was the local prison and beyond that, the top of a colliery rising mysteriously out of the sky.

When I turned back into the room Mother already stood behind me. She wanted to know if I had received my invitation yet and when I said no and surely one did not have to be asked if one were related, Mother looked upset. 'I'm afraid they did not mean to ask you,' she said, 'or else they have forgotten.' We both stood there a little longer saying nothing. Then I turned my back to her. 'It makes no difference,' I said. 'Please Mother, don't worry about that.' Mother turned abruptly saying she was really sorry, but now she must hurry for she was late. I watched her hastening down the garden path, looking very festive in her black lace gown. I wondered whether she sensed that I was still young enough to go through a kind of Gethsemane because of a

thing like that. Perhaps no one could have guessed how I would have loved to be asked, longing as I did for a friendly social life. I took off my blue dress again and opened the package which was meant to be a present for the bride. From the little jewel box with the purple anemones on the lid the prettiest tune tinkled out into the grey afternoon. The jolly little melody it played made me think of home and, for the first time, I felt that it had been a loss to leave it. The church bells had now ceased to ring and I lay down on my old-fashioned bed, weeping copiously like a child.

Soon the bells were ringing again. The service must have ended. My eyes fell on the holy picture above my bed, which always took my mind back to the convent where everyone had one passionate purpose in life. How enviable it seemed to have a fully rounded existence. Sitting still like a Yogi I tried to meditate, but meditation outside monasteries did not seem to lead to anything much either. Oh, where was the witty sparkling world I had imagined marriage to plunge me into?

I would go for a walk. I seemed in great need of having someone to talk to and the only person one could always call on or speak to was a priest. I was full of anger though, and not in the proper spirit to enter a cathedral. I wished that the painted roof would open and some magic thing would fly down from Heaven and rescue me. I did not exactly know from what. I suppose the very young priest, who stood in the porch hanging up notices, knew me by sight.

‘You are new to this parish?’ he said.

‘Yes, Father.’

‘And what’s your nationality?’

‘Swiss,’ I said, humbly and yet proud, but thinking it of no consequence hereabout. Then, sitting down beside me on the stone seat, he wanted to know what I ‘was after doing’ leaving such a lovely country!



I said I did not know and went on telling him that I had been left out of a wedding feast this very afternoon.

'Glory be,' he laughed, 'you're not after minding such a thing?' He went on to assure me that an English wedding was not much fun anyway and that I had missed nothing. 'Och, do not be grieving! When me brother married in Ireland, 'twas dancing in the road we was.'

He then asked me if my husband's family were Protestants and who they were and where they lived, urging me to go inside and look for 'the peace you'll be findin'.' 'Peace,' he added, as if it were merchandise, 'is soft and gentle and delightful.'

I still felt that the city was something aloof and uncaring even though the shop windows were gaily decorated with spring flowers and spring clothes, and people you bumped into said 'Sorry,' or 'I beg your pardon,' in a friendly way, and a blackbird was singing evensong right in the centre of the market place on the very top of one of the elms.

Walking along the main street, I grew interested in a window full of gorgeous furniture, flashy looking-glasses and pink upholstery, offered at hire-purchase rates. Half a crown a week to buy a sideboard and three-and-six to buy a sofa covered in pink chenille. A little fat man came out of the shop and said, 'Come in little lady, costs you nothing.' He walked right round me, pressing a little closer as though, like a sheepdog, he wanted to herd me in. A soft melting tune began to emerge from inside the shop, a Strauss waltz, played by a gramophone. I shook my head and said I did not believe in hire-purchase and, being Swiss, I had never heard of it! I did not think that I could live with shiny furniture like that either and preferred the badly matching things Mother had given us. Window shopping, I noticed,

was a popular pastime among the English, who had, it seemed, plenty of time for such pursuits.

Innumerable cars stood outside Aunt Ethel's house as I walked past. She was evidently giving an after-wedding party. I decided not to be upset any longer. Indeed, I felt I was as good as they and would have been kinder. But I could not help wondering if there was anything wrong with me. Perhaps I was too green and confiding, or else they thought that the confines of civilization ended with the Channel. I did not eat garlic, nor did I swear or use my knife and fork differently from them. Nor was there anything vulgar about my clothes, nor had I taken to make-up as yet, and being sure that rouge was sinful, having been told so many times by the nuns, I went about looking as pale as ever if not downright green.

The Pines seemed to be dreaming as I returned, not a whisper in the trees. Strange to see a room from without where one usually sits and sews. It was a dull room really, in spite of my personal belongings.

John had not had the least desire to go to anybody's wedding. He did not even know there had been one. Why should I mind? They were a dull crowd anyway, it was true, and John and I loved one another enough not to require any kind of company. Not when we were together.

He was sitting there by the table leisurely mending an old clock. How relaxed Englishmen were. How they shut off their working life the moment they came home. Perhaps that was how they set their minds in order, taking a stroll in the garden, feeling balanced and refreshed. But not I. I picked up a book at random and started to read aloud to him.

‘Go to the raging sea and say, “Be still”,  
Bid the wild lawless winds obey thy will.

Preach to the storm and reason with Despair,  
But tell not Misery's son THAT LIFE IS FAIR.'

When I squinted to see whether John was listening, I saw his eyes wandering over to where a seed catalogue lay open on the table. Looking up a little guiltily he said, 'Cheer up, little thing. Come along into the yard, I've something to show you. It's a surprise!'

There, leaning against the dividing wall, was a large clumsy-looking tandem painted green. He had just bought it, a second-hand machine, its handlebars sticking up like the horns of a cow. John hated motoring. According to him, all the troubles in the world, all the sorrows and ill-health, would be removed if only people took more exercise.

Presently, he wheeled it out of the gate leaning it against the kerbstone, told me how to get on and set himself in position with his left foot on the pedal, saying, 'Now we can have some fresh air,' as though the air were fresh anywhere within ten miles of the town.

'I'm a little frightened,' I said, in order to delay the effort, for I had never ridden on a tandem. 'I knew a woman in the village,' I went on, 'who died falling off a cycle. She broke her leg so badly they had to amputate it, she was quite young, like me. She died in the hope of a glorious resurrection though, which was a blessing.' John was not interested. He reminded me that he would keep the balance and would do all the pushing. I did not think that this could be much fun for him and was glad that dusk was settling in and we had no audience.

We went on and on for miles, along a shiny road damp from the rain, passing people standing at tram stops, avoiding the glittering tram lines, past thousands of houses exactly like ours, being pushed along partially by the prevailing east wind.

‘Wonderful!’ shouted John. ‘Makes you feel good!’

It was not really my idea of bliss. By and by I heard a sound, a sound I was familiar with, a sound that came to you of an evening when the fishermen were out on the Lake of Constance. Oars were swishing through the water, creaking in the rowlocks. We were by the River Trent, where we halted for a while until the man with his boat came swinging from under a bridge. We went down among the driftwood and watched the current and a painted barge going by, lit up with coloured lights. But I was still thinking about that wedding to which we had not been invited.

Soon we dodged trams and buses again and sometimes John forgot to leave enough space between me and other traffic for my peace of mind. But pride made me persevere. English girls were said to be sporty creatures and I wanted to be as good as they. Not that we met any other cyclists anywhere. We stopped at an inn and ate some cheese and drank some dark and bitter beer without froth or sparkle. When I discovered the maggots on the cheese it turned my stomach. John said that the maggots belonged to it and went on eating. It seemed to signify John’s whole attitude to life.

My legs trembled with fatigue as we dismounted outside The Pines. I stood there for a moment or two unable to walk, gazing up at the silent suburban avenue and the attic dormer room which I had recently turned into a study, the walls of which I had painted with innumerable balloons in blues, reds and yellows, where I was now writing down my first impressions which, lively though they were, were bound to be full of prejudices. As I got undressed and quietly said my prayers, I heard John as in a trance, talking about the ‘runs’ we were going to make on this enormous green tandem, the moors, the streams in the Derbyshire mountains thirty miles away we were going to see some day soon.

## Chapter Sixteen

ON that chilly day when I arrived in England and had been changing my shoes, sitting on Mother's bed with the door wide open, I saw a youth outside on the landing staring at me hard, put out his tongue and disappear. It all happened so quickly that it was difficult to believe my eyes. I heard him whistling shrilly, though, a little later from another room. I felt deeply offended. This was John's brother home from school. Had he been a Swiss boy, he would have come in, bowed politely and shaken my hand.

I did not see him any more until now he was home again on holiday, asking me to go fishing with him. I had often gone fishing on the Lake of Constance with my Uncle Hypolite, who was the captain of a ferry boat, but had never seen a fish as yet in the River Trent, even though I had seen men holding rods, staring at the water for hours on end. When I met young Bill again I thought immediately of his large red tongue, but was not going to let it depress me any more.

On my way to the tram stop, where I was to meet him, I suddenly dropped my new silk underpants which Mother had presented me with, as she thought my Swiss variety too impractical, needing too much intricate laundering for poor

Mrs. Hall to cope with. There they lay in a little heap of pink at my feet. It was no use at all pretending that they did not belong to me, having no other choice but to step out of them. There was no one about but two workmen in white overalls, who clearly saw it happen. They looked immediately away. Neither of them laughed, no embarrassing remarks were made by them. With solemn faces they marched on, one of them carrying a ladder, swaying a little as he turned away, minding his own business. Oh, England! I sighed, I think I am beginning to love you. From such small beginnings I realized affection began slowly to take root.

Young Bill liked fishing and seemed to have a contempt for people who did not care for it, the same as John with his ideas about exercise and cycling. We did not talk much. Bill's mind was entirely on fishing. The worst was you had to fish for just anything that cropped up. Sitting on a rock shivering a little, I watched some enormous, incredibly placid and incurious cows chewing the cud, and since Bill did not want to talk, I took out a volume of Keats which my teacher had lent me, and grew quite exalted, rejoicing immoderately as I always did when there was anything to rejoice in.

No, no! go not to Lethe, neither twist  
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer they pale forehead to be kiss'd  
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;  
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,  
Nor let the beetle nor the death-moth be  
Your mournful Psyche . . .

Oh, this was lovely stuff! I sighed voluptuously.  
The sun grew a little warmer and after an hour or so Bill

caught a fish about four inches long and he too rejoiced in his quiet way. His blue eyes lit up in his brown face and he said, 'Well, well!'

More fishermen arrived on the scene and by midday there was a man every ten yards or so as far as the eye could see, solemn men, wearing cloth caps, none of them speaking to the other. I wondered what went on in their minds. Bill asked me what the book was about I had been reading, and when I said Keats, he said, 'Golly, you comical little high-brow.' We unpacked our sandwiches and Bill asked me if I would care to hold the rod. I said no thank you very much, I did not think there were large enough fish down there in that murky water. He thought that was a continental point of view. Bill, lying on his back, his face hidden underneath his hat, asked suddenly how I liked living in England. I thought for a minute or two and not wanting to flatter him, I said, 'Not very much.' Still speaking from underneath his hat, he said that considering the grim little valley I came from, he would have thought I would be grateful to be here. Besides, it was a question of liking it or lumping it. Bill yawned loudly once or twice, remarking after a while that he thought a clever girl like me would have realized how it would be living in an industrial city.

Soon we were tramping to the station. There was no need to hurry. There never was in England. When we had walked half an hour without speaking, we went into a cottage to have some tea. The ceiling was so low that Bill had to stoop. The parlour was full of wonderful stuff. I had never been inside an English cottage before. Photographs of soldiers, some faded, some new, were hanging over the fireplace, wedding groups, and Dante meeting Beatrice. A grandfather clock with a large slow pendulum swinging behind painted glass, and an enormous clock face with the name of Smith on it, china dogs, cats and birds, and turkey feathers clut-

tered the mantelpiece, also a dish of imitation fruit in brilliant colours. It was not unlike Grandmama's cottage, except hers had no soldiers to commemorate.

We sat down by a table covered with oil-cloth in front of a huge brown tea-pot, and Bill asked me 'to pour'.

'Pour what?' I asked.

'The tea of course, silly,' he said, and then he showed me how.

'It's the woman's job in England,' he said, 'pouring out the tea.' I poured and poured. Bill had four cups of tea and nearly all the scones. One could not help but like him, a youth so completely natural. I grew to understand at last that when he was most rude to me, he really meant to show that he did not mind me having come. Very English, that. He stared at me in a moody sort of way and said, 'I'm just wondering what John saw in you!'

'Seems to be the general feeling,' I said, not without bitterness.

'Well, are you surprised? After all, we've never had a foreigner in our family.'

'If I thought that because I'm foreign I were to be outside ordinary life for ever in this town, I would one day jump into the river. Besides, you think foreigners are not as good as you and you don't like them. Very well. But don't forget you are a foreigner too whenever you go across the Channel, be it in France or India or in Africa.'

Bill smiled, a slow wide smile. 'Talking about jumping into the Trent,' he said, 'remember the canal is much nearer to The Pines.' But, he thought I ought to see a little more of England first while I was young. Time enough for suicide later on.

Still gently chaffing me in an English sort of way, he brought me home, where I showed him the improvements I had made in the attic, the coloured balloons, the desk in the



centre painted blue, and the pretty curtains over the barred windows from where I could see across into a similar room of the house next door, where a young maidservant spent an hour every afternoon sitting on her bed with her head in her hands, rocking gently back and forth.

‘Perhaps she’s got a toothache,’ said Bill.

‘Most likely she’s sick for home,’ I said, ‘and what’s more, I feel as though I should do something about it.’

‘Whatever for, you’re not her keeper?’

‘No, but I feel as if I ought to be.’

‘I don’t see why you should, I mean to say . . . What with that kind of disposition, a woman like that might as well be dead.’

‘Need you be so brutal?’ I asked.

‘Well, I mean to say, she should be able to look after herself. If she had some sense. Some people do make a flaming mess of their lives.’

At that, Bill gave me a sideways look and grinned. But I was not amused.

‘Come on down,’ he said, as though he did not like the conversation. Besides, he was due to take Mrs. Hemmingway’s daughter for a run on his motor cycle. I could not help asking if he liked her mother. He had never given it a thought, he said. ‘She’s one of the first ladies in the town,’ he added.

‘What exactly is a lady, Bill?’ I asked, thinking that perhaps it was the equivalent of Mama, who was looked up to because she was creative in many ways, and exceptionally well educated.

‘A lady,’ said Bill, who evidently found it very difficult to find an explanation, ‘is the kind of woman who never has to brush her hair herself, or clean her shoes, a woman who does not care a damn if she is liked or not.’

I was not greatly convinced, nor it seemed to me was he.

**'I don't believe you!' I said.**

**Bill shrugged his shoulders, said 'So long,' and slammed the door behind him. Thinking about Bill, I came to the conclusion that one could not help liking him.**

## Chapter Seventeen

I WAS gathering some more lime blossoms while the children of the neighbourhood played and eventually lost their ball in our garden. They were too shy to fetch it. 'That's the house that foreign woman lives in,' said a little boy of seven. 'What's she look like?' asked another, and then the boy spotted me on top of the ladder and said, 'Oh, there she is on top of that tree.' A bright young woman with a shopping basket stared up at me too and smiled. She wore a swishy dress of pale green and a saucy white hat, the kind Mother would not let me wear, and a string of imitation pearls. She stopped by the gate and asked me what I was gathering the blossoms for. She said her name was Betty Wright, adding, 'You don't much like living here, do you?' making me wonder if my ill-controlled features gave away every thought in my head and every passing mood. I shook my head.

'Well, neither do I,' she said. 'You see, I am a southerner. Here,' she went on, making a sweeping gesture including all the chimneys and housetops we could see, 'they only think in terms of money.'

'Do they really?' I asked, genuinely curious to understand.

'It's a well-known fact,' she said. 'Everybody knows about the Midlands and the North.'

Could one, I wondered, cut a country in half like this and label it 'culture' and 'money'? Could one go through life disliking a place, a country, a city like that for ever, and live?

'Look at me,' she said. 'I've hated this place for fifteen years.' She did not look a hater though. Surely she must have grown used to it by now. Surely every day must have come alive for her with one thing and another? Besides, she was English and could not possibly feel an alien here.

'Come and have a cup of tea with me and I will ask some of my friends,' she said.

'So you have some friends here?' I inquired, and she said, 'Lord, yes, plenty.'

Mrs. Wright certainly had a pleasant voice and English spoken by her sounded charming. I watched her as she walked down the hill towards the tram stop, thinking how her graceful figure, her high heels and her shapely legs would have pleased Father. When I told John about Betty Wright, he said that I should not take her very seriously, that he knew of her, she talked a lot and did not mean half she said.

It was Thursday afternoon when, dressed in my bright red frock, I called on Mrs. Wright, staring up for a moment or two at the impressive façade of her house, which stood nicely detached in its own grounds. I had been looking forward to this afternoon for days. I was taken into the drawing-room full of young women. Everybody looking very dashing, wearing little hats with spotted veils covering their eyes. A gramophone was playing a song about bananas. I was introduced and Mrs. Wright asked me to call her Betty. Everybody, she said, called her Betty, if not worse. Women whose names were Pamela, Monica, Dorothy and Eleanor were introduced to me and when they asked me my Christian

name everybody burst out laughing, asking if I minded very much. And how they laughed at 'Aloysia' and kept it up. But even though I smiled with them, I did not see any joke about it. Someone wanted to know if I had been to the wedding. When I told them no, I had not been invited, they said they would not have thought the family could be as bad as that. They were all sympathy. Such behaviour, they declared, was the result of the most awful meanness.

The woman Eleanor hoped that I would not be so silly as to mind, which made me feel a great deal better and determined to become like the British and not care too much. It was astonishing really how happy I felt among these bright young matrons. Everyone was very frank. I had to tell them the simple story of my life. It certainly sounded slightly imbecile, telling it like that, especially about leaving the little valley, wanting to go out 'into the world'.

I found it very difficult to call Mrs. Wright Betty so soon, but I never took my eyes off her, she was so lively and so gay, in spite of her fifteen years among 'Those dour Midlanders', as she called them.

Over tea, Betty Wright began to talk of her husband as though he were a roaring joke. Perhaps he was. The others, too, thought their men something to laugh at, and not something greatly to be respected, as the Swiss women do. Betty said she could scream when she thought how anxiously she had been waiting for love until her husband came along. Marriage, alas, was just one flat, plain tedium.

Betty's three boys kicked up a great deal of noise upstairs. Betty sighed. 'Don't have any kids,' she said to me. Just then three boys, so utterly different from Betty, ran out on to the lawn, their hair such pale red it was almost pink. 'Just like George,' she said. I wanted to know how Betty filled her days when the boys were at school. She said she went shopping mostly and changed her library books, and on

Thursdays she took the young curate out in her car. 'Mind you, we are only pals,' she added, as if I could possibly have thought otherwise, coming straight from Sacred Heart. She hated, she went on, to rely on George for everything! 'I mean to say, one likes to be admired for one's brain occasionally.' She liked to discuss Plato and the other day the curate had lent her a book by Aristotle. It was a scream. All about sex. Sometimes, she took her mother-in-law out in the car, 'the old battle-axe'.

Betty showed me her house and I hoped I would not have to show her mine in return. Outside in her back garden hung half a dozen long woollen underpants made, Betty said, of camel-hair, belonging to George, who wore such coddling clothes summer and winter. The bathroom cupboard, she said, was full of embrocations, plasters and pink cotton-wool, which George needed to combat the English climate.

Betty's bedroom was of the fluffy kind, very English, the kind a God-fearing Swiss from Altbad, who thought 'sex' something sacred, would consider a *demi-mondaine* to favour. Everything was pink, covered with shiny satin. Great pink roses patterned the pale green carpet. It was like walking in a green pool with outsize water-lilies. Frilled and starched pink curtains hung cross-wise over the windows and in a painted Swiss box on her bedside table, which she had bought on her honeymoon, she kept, so she said, six different 'Aids to Hygiene' which should prevent any further red-haired little boys knocking at the door of life.

'None of them reliable,' she added, but then George was such a duffer where even the slightest need for skill was called for. I could not quite believe my ears.

'Sorry,' said Betty as she saw me blush. 'Perhaps your mamma did not enlighten you.' Then she took my hand and kissed me. 'Darling,' she said, 'you aren't shocked? Are you?' I smiled and my eyes filled with tears. Nobody had shown me

so much friendliness before and even though it may have meant nothing much, it was very pleasant indeed.

Later, in the drawing-room, where there was also a great deal of pink, the other women talked about their in-laws, one of them saying that she asked the 'old girl', meaning her husband's mother, not to darken her door again. Perhaps, I thought, I'm lacking in spirit by accepting Mother's managing ways so meekly. But then there were the Commandments. I had been brought up on 'Honour your Father and Mother'.

'I'm sure we're shocking you,' said Betty. I shook my head and smiled.

Someone asked me to play the piano, 'since they had heard how well I played'. Betty quickly dusted the keys and for a little while I played to them. Soon though, the bridge tables were set out and I was taught the value of the cards. I watched for a while and then made to go.

'Don't go yet, you must meet George,' said Betty.

'My Leslie is coming to fetch me,' said Eleanor, a dark girl with deep blue eyes. 'You'll like him,' she added, 'he's crazy about the piano, plays jazz mostly.' Leslie, according to Eleanor, was so attractive that he was constantly pursued by sex-starved spinsters and married women dying of boredom. The poor dear was so kind and, like all men, he liked to be pursued.

Just then the two men, George and Leslie, arrived. I felt I knew so much about these two men that I was a little embarrassed and tried to hide behind the piano and the curtains with the pink roses printed on them. George looked severe, thin, if not a little seedy, wore horn-rimmed glasses, was almost bald. I found it impossible to think of him as any kind of lover. Leslie though, fat and jolly and a little out of breath, kissed all the women present on the mouth and when he caught sight of me I rose and hedged away. He paused and

lit a cigarette instead. He then turned and kissed some of the others once more, saying that was what they all expected of him, while George, gaunt and twitchy, looked on matter-of-factly. His hobby was collecting prints, old prints, and breeding spaniels.

Eleanor said how it galled her that her husband was in trade, 'retail mind you', and how she would not have minded if it had been 'wholesale' but to own a shop, oh dear, it was nothing to write home about. 'You see, my father was a naval officer.' I said that I did not understand and could not see the difference, which seemed to silence her.

Eleanor walked home with me and thought that it was nice to have met and hoped that I would settle down and join the bridge party. That they might appear empty and frivolous, what with one thing and another, but as a whole, they were quite enjoyable. 'I mean to say, what the dickens does anybody want to do all the time. You can't always be talking. I mean, what one says or what anybody else thinks is not always clever or amusing or new. When one plays a game, and that's what I always say, you are at least free of yourself for a while. I mean, what else is there to do anyway? I mean to say,' she added, looking at me rather searchingly, 'you can't always improve your mind by reading highbrow stuff or wishing you were elsewhere.'

By the gates of The Pines Eleanor took leave of me and I wondered if I should ask her to come in. I felt a little ashamed of the house. Spots of stucco had peeled off above the bay window and were scattered on the lawn in tiny pieces, the curtains looked drab, and over the green gate with the lattice on top dividing the back yard, John's socks were dangling from the washline, all beautifully darned by me, the way the nuns had taught me. John was in the yard oiling the tandem, wearing those awful flannel trousers the like of which I had never seen outside this country.



Eleanor waved good-bye to me.

John and I went into the kitchen together and once inside he hugged me and asked if I had enjoyed myself. We were still getting acquainted with each other and I was still much in love and very happy to be at home with him. Whether John would really and truly ever grow acquainted with me was a thing I often asked myself, for I was so rarely the same from one day to another.

John's mother had called while I was out and had left me a book to read written by an Anglican Bishop. It was to show, said John, that God preferred the Church of England. 'Don't bother to read it,' he added, 'I wouldn't if I were you.' I thought, however, that I ought to read Mother's book, since it would be rude not to. Besides, like most people, I too was interested in religion and the varieties thereof, although John said that I would not be much wiser.

That evening I wrote in my diary that one could not sum up any nationality. Not entirely. Here in my neighbourhood lived some of the aunts who had ridden with the Queen. They appeared to have left their youth when they had turned forty. Then there was Betty, who did not mind talking about her husband's behaviour in bed. You could not do that in Altbad either. Whatever happened in bed was no laughing matter to the Swiss, it was something almost holy, if not forbidden fruit. Nor could you make love in a public park. But you could hold hands in public and talk about your immortal soul, and reveal the truth that lay in your bosom, which, who knows, was probably just as bad.

## Chapter Eighteen

FOR a long time I watched the starlings digging for worms. They reminded me of Swiss housewives, dressed in black, always terribly busy, tremendously dutiful, pulling this, shaking that, women whose names were Ida, Elisa, Bertha, Emma and Martha, women who simply loved work. I wondered a little what they had always been struggling to accomplish by their frenzied activities, mending, altering, gardening, cutting down, patching, polishing. Already, after only a short time in England, I could sit for hours at a stretch, doing absolutely nothing, watching birds, reading some of England's wonderful authors, who had so much more gentle humour than ours, and did not often delve into those gloomy depths like the Germans I was fed on. I was learning fast. I could also keep the mind quite empty and be completely lazy. Considering that for two whole years every minute of the day had to be accounted for at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, this was no mean feat.

Sometimes I felt so happy, even though I knew almost nobody, that I danced round and round or sat on the table and sang the songs my grandmama used to sing when she milked the goats. And now, since the corroded pipes shuddered and knocked, I decided to have a hot bath in the

middle of the afternoon. You would not do that in Altbad either. It would have been the talk of the village where a woman's knowledge of the woman next door was always intimate and thorough.

I threw a handful of pine extract into the bath, which turned the water green, and found a book in the attic, left by a former occupant of the house, entitled *The Garden of Allah*, and took it in the bath with me. It was certainly fortunate, I mused, that I was so thin, considering the narrow baths made in England, which like so many other things, houses, men's shirts and jackets and women's ready-to-wear clothes, seemed to be made for people without any flesh on them.

I must not be critical, though, of the narrowness of things in the house, which had been given to us with its repair bill footed by Mother, who, like all her friends, had inherited or made their money from innumerable sources such as cigarettes, beer, groceries, motor-cars, hosiery, lace and bicycles.

Lying there in the middle of a drowsy afternoon, with the smell of pine pungent in my nose, I closed my eyes remembering former times, the tin bath in the wash-house of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, where we bathed chastely wrapped in an old nightgown in ten inches of water, only once in three months. Even the busy sounds of the place came back to me, the murmuring of praying nuns, the bells, the humming of the cultivators, the organ music, the scraping of violins, the screeching of wheelbarrows and the cooing of doves. The smells too, of steam oozing from the wash-house doors, the scent of roses and violets from the convent garden, of drying herbs which I had helped to gather, and of course, the scent of the pinewoods not far away. I had not improved since then. How worldly I had become since I had crept out of the convent that morning before dawn in search of a fuller life. It could really make

you laugh! Life outside had seemed a garden of roses as I marched along that rutted road to the nearest railway station three miles away.

And here I lay in scented water, reading this sexy book about a heroinè resting seductively in the warm golden sands under the eastern sun, being made love to by a swarthy young man, who was a priest'and should have known better.

It was not the right moment for Mother to call. She had walked in through the kitchen door and stood beside me wiping her glasses. I realized more and more that I did not like being alone with my parents-in-law. There was always something 'special' they wanted to say to me. Mother sat down on the laundry basket, denting it rather, asking why on earth I had sent that Irish priest to see her.

'Oh, but I haven't told him to call,' I almost shouted, wondering rather why she minded so. After all, coming from a valley studded with shrines high and low, and Capuchin monks walking about everywhere, one took a priest for granted. Mother wanted to know what made me discuss my affairs with him, did I want to be ruled by priests? I closed my eyes. I wanted, like Saint Eusebius, to take a running leap into the blue. I wanted, like an angel, to float away on to the mountain tops. Instead of this, I lay rigid in a cooling bath of water right up to my chin. I heard Mother saying that one of her brothers, who was a scholar of high degree, who knew Greek and Latin as well as Arabic, would prove to me that I was wrong in my theology.

Mother once more wiped her glasses and I saw that she had tears in her eyes. I felt desperately sorry for her then, for any show of weakness in an English person completely bowled me over. But there was nothing I could do about it. She would, I felt, have to endure it all, the same as I. Silently we went downstairs. Out of her shopping basket Mother took a large jar of malt extract of which, she said,

I should take three spoons a day. I was, she thought, far too pale and thin.

When Mother had left, I took the malt extract from the table, read the instructions and without thinking, threw it through the open window into the yard, where the rhododendron bush took a terribly long time about producing an open bloom. John looked at me calmly and tried to hide a grin. 'You are really angry now, aren't you?' he said with due respect, scratching himself which he always did when he was disturbed. He flopped down into his chair and pulled me on to his knees.

Later, he went out into the yard, picked up the malt extract, saw that the pot was cracked, and threw it in the dustbin.

## Chapter Nineteen

THERE seemed an awful sameness about my days. Perhaps there was a sameness about most women's days in any suburb unless they had children or played golf.

I sat in the attic and wrote a poem and got entangled with *Weltschmerz*, like a fly in a spider's web. Alas, like most other poets, all my lyrics wept. I could never be sure though that Mother would not come up to see me sitting there looking paler than ever.

It was about three o'clock when she arrived, flushed and out of breath, sat down on an upturned box, letting her eyes wander along the wall from paintings to prints. There was Boecklin's 'Holy Grail', a couple of death-masks of composers, and a melancholy scene of Segantini's grave.

'I want to write my memoirs,' I said, but Mother did not think that funny. I even showed her the cover which I had designed. It portrayed a young woman in flowing white robes, leaning yearningly against a stone wall, looking far away to some distant hills through an archway of a cloister. It was a lovely woman with a perfect profile, the kind I often wished I had. Mother sighed. Without saying a word she fished out an iron tonic from her basket, which her doctor had especially recommended for me. I was gradually

accumulating a cupboard full of tonics, green ones, and red ones, as well as purges and liver pills in which she had such astonishing faith.

When John came home, I said that I felt like turning into a raven, screaming and shouting blue murder, like the one in Heine's poem, but he thought that what I needed was to go out again with him. On the green tandem of course.

Swaying a little unsteadily, we climbed a steep hill, dodging people, perambulators and cats, passed small-holdings, allotments and places where people lived in caravans, railway carriages, old buses and two-roomed wooden huts. Sometimes I tried to get a view past John's shoulders, but it was not easy.

'Are you comfortable?' he shouted once or twice. I shrugged and spread my hands. We whizzed down a hill, John's head tilted down so I had a glimpse of cornfields in front and fields of young cabbages on either side. About ten minutes of that and we turned uphill again. Sitting behind a tall man on a tandem would give any woman time to think more deeply, and to long for other places, a restful garden perhaps, a deck-chair on the lawn. But a woman, once she was married, my grandmama said, had no proper existence of her own, she belonged to her man and lived exactly as he expected her to.

John swung the tandem into a lane and there we rested for a little while, John leaning against a hedge lighting his pipe. After a few puffs, he put it away and instead of holding hands and talking of love or far away things, he wanted to go on again. John always knew where there was a pretty lane off the main road and there, where we found lovers popping up their heads, and cycles leaning against the hedges, we found a cosy little resting place in a hollow.

I was still on my knees when John said, 'Hide your face quick.' I got my head down in a hurry, but it was too late. We were seen by Mrs. Hemmingway, who was exercising her dog. She made us come up to her turreted house on the hill for a drink. It was a most aristocratic place. One could imagine that everyone living there would have blue eyes, be tall and lean, with narrow hands and feet, but Mrs. Hemmingway was a heavy woman, almost like the baker's wife at home. John leant the cycle against the balustrade, hooking the handle into the wrought-iron trimmings of an antique coach lamp. She led us into the hall, which was four times as large as the waiting-room of the railway station in our village at Altbad. The carpets were like mountain moss to walk on. There was plenty of soft chintzy furniture and vases full of roses. The chairs were the kind you were not comfortable in unless you sat at the very edge of them, or drew your feet up and sat on them. A grand piano in the vast drawing-room looked as though no one ever played it.

On the window seat sat the youngest daughter of the house, a sweet-looking girl, rather fat, the friend of Bill's. She looked as shy as I was myself. She was doing nothing. It was not the kind of room anyone did any work in, not like Mama's which had a large bureau in a corner, an old harp which she played sometimes, an old spinning wheel, which she also used occasionally, and masses of books.

As soon as John left the room with her husband, a small henpecked looking little man, I felt a mere plaything in Mrs. Hemmingway's hands. The moment the men shut the door, she wanted to know how it had all happened, how John and I had met. After all, there had been the two of us, living far apart and we were not apparently made for each other, if I saw what she meant, not speaking the same language and all that. Did one, I wondered, ask such questions if one were on top of the social ladder and held



sway over a court of people as important as yourself? What was I to say?

‘Well, you see, we have some wonderful scenery at home, the dreamiest lakes and ponds with the sun on them, and if an Englishman meets a girl in such a place, he is already half-way to falling in love.’

‘Ah, yes, quite so!’ She poured me out another glass of sherry.

‘You see, I met John in the wood where my grandmama lived and then again on the Lake of Constance, and later on the Ebenalp and in the Chapel of the White Madonna, and after that, I knew that even if I never saw him again, we would never be able to forget each other. You see, nothing was the same again after that for either of us.’

‘You’re very romantic, aren’t you?’ she said, and I said, ‘Yes, but not always, either.’

I hated being cross-examined and mostly I shrivelled up if people tried to do it, but having consumed two glasses of sherry, I began saying outrageous things. I told her that it was always treacherous for a woman, in midsummer, to sit around doing nothing, looking at her image in the water and seeing there her other self, and that even Englishmen were sometimes so carried away by their surroundings when abroad, that their very wives and mothers would not know them again.

I suddenly fell silent, remembering John as he joined the Alpine Club and went for a climb with Papa wearing his studded boots and his eternal flannel trousers and a rucksack of such dimensions that from the back he looked like a mule going up the Santis with cases of beer. He was often singing as he went along. It struck me that I had not heard him singing since. I sighed deeply and Mrs. Hemmingway said she did not think I had anything to be unhappy about, or had I?

'I never said I was unhappy,' I smiled back at her.

Mrs. Hemmingway, who, so John said, had been born in Leeds and wore a floral dress with bits of chiffon hanging from her in numerous places, wanted to know what my father's profession was. I said he was a *Zollamtsvorstand* and told her I could not translate it, that it was a first class government job.

Just then Mr. Hemmingway and John came in from the garden. They stood about the room saying nothing in particular. How these Englishmen could keep silent, I thought. Even though I understood a fair amount of English and could say almost everything I wanted to convey, Mrs. Hemmingway still spoke very loudly and gestured to me as though otherwise I would not understand. She pointed to two portraits by Sargent on the wall, saying these were her parents. You could see by their faces, their skins unlined, almost shiny, that they had been entirely successful in life. I thought of the poor family album Aunt Lucy had given me, full of very ordinary people, the men wearing large moustaches, black suits with starched white collars, looking as though they were in their Sunday best, which of course, they were. The women looking either grim because life had been a battle, or else wide-eyed and sentimental because they had married someone who was kind to them, someone in the government with a pension to come later.

We thanked the Hemmingways for the sherry and said we must get back home. She did not ask me to drop in again soon. She pressed the bell. A butler held the door open. He closed it softly behind us and we mounted our tandem, being watched with interest by two scullery maids from a landing window.

Riding back in the rain was just what John enjoyed, dreaming, perhaps, of other similar outings also in the rain, when he spent night after night in Youth Hostels, sleeping in

his underclothes on hard beds or communal mattresses. John fished about underneath his dripping cape for the house key, clicked open the door, hung his cape over the sink and said that it had been a wonderful ride. I hung my wet skirt on the rack, took off my shoes and put them neatly side by side by the boiler.

‘Did you enjoy it?’ said John.

‘Yes,’ I lied, adding ‘more or less.’

‘I’m glad of that,’ he said.

I made some coffee and boiled some eggs, looked myself over in the kitchen mirror, watched John poking the boiler, thinking that it was one thing to climb up a snow-hooded mountain picking gentians from the pathside, it was another thing cycling out in the rain on a windswept plain.

## Chapter Twenty

TWICE a week I went into town for my English lesson with a plump little Jewish teacher. She made me learn poetry by heart and recite it after her, line by line. Miss Gerda would hold my hand, which made me very nervous, as she wanted to commiserate with me because, she said, we were just crazy folk, she and I. I did not think I was as crazy as she. Besides, holding hands had been strictly forbidden at the convent, as well as punished, so that I still shrank from any one of my own sex trying to be affectionate. She taught me nearly all the unhappy poems from the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. Miss Gerda went on and on about 'poppies to be brought to her grave so that she would sleep more sound' until I felt very lonesome, and when tears came to my eyes she would call me a poor lamb. I almost tiptoed home-wards, deciding that Miss Gerda was not good for me. There was something about her that was too much like myself.

The walk through Elm Avenue was doubly mournful after my lesson, for the wind in the elms was saying things I did not want to hear. I almost wished I were dead. The Pines too was as still as death and I was very glad when the little postman came up the garden path, wearing his cap

jauntily over one ear like an admiral, and brought me a letter from home. He told me how charming my accent was, if I did not mind him saying so. I said I rather liked him mentioning it since I had just decided to stick to it. I began to tell him about my English lessons and how my husband's family wanted me to speak the King's English. He just stared at me as if I were a wonder and said 'Crikey!' Since I had no one much to talk to, I also told him that we Swiss did not mind foreign accents, except High German as spoken by the '*Schwaben*' by which we meant most Germans, especially those from the north. High German was a thorn in our flesh because none of us could speak it well. Nor did we want to; it sounded arrogant and affected.

The letter which the postman brought came from my friend Josephine. She wanted to come to England too. Everybody always wanted to come to England because it was across the water and was 'different' and because everyone wanted to learn the language. Josephine thought I was very lucky to be living here. She did not know that I too was a bit of a thorn in some people's flesh. Nor had she ever seen houses like The Pines which were really so ugly it made you laugh.

Josephine was born in an almshouse down the valley because there had been nowhere else for her mother to go. She was illegitimate and the whole village knew that her father had been an Englishman, who, after a short ski-ing holiday, did not know that he had fathered a child.

For nine years we had walked to school together, as she had lived next door where her mother kept house for the old doctor who had given her a home. Even though she knew the sorrows of being fatherless she was not an unhappy child. Like most Swiss who live beneath mountains, which, like women purling, seem to drop the centuries through their fingers, she had a philosophy of her own.

Almost her first memory, and incidentally mine, were the pictures on the walls in their room under the doctor's roof. What cheerful colours ! Saints wearing dazzling garments and God Himself wrapped in a golden cloak made of the rays of the sun, not to mention St. Joseph, her patron saint, wearing a yellow cape edged with purple, and all the disciples enveloped in flowing robes, walking through the yellow corn, their locks reaching down to their shoulders. There was such peace in that room, with the sky smiling through the window, and far below the green-blue Lake of Constance dreaming away day after day as if waiting for the end of the world.

The doctor was a widower and very old. His rooms were filled with paintings of another kind. They hung above each other, or leant against the walls, or rested on the furniture. All the colours of the world were in them, the sad dark greens of the cemetery, the greys of a rainstorm on the lake, and all the reds and purples of excitement, of glory and success.

'When I'm dead,' the old doctor often said to Josephine, 'you shall have some of these pictures, and if you sell them you'll be able to put some money in the bank.' He would soon be dead, we thought years ago, staring at his rosy skin which was crumpled like tissue paper. It was pleasant thinking of my friend and the past, sitting by the sighing chimney. It was better than wandering round the town or the suburb as if bereft.

We often went with the doctor when he visited the sick, and when we returned to the surgery he allowed us to watch microbes split themselves through his microscope. He trained Josephine to become his secretary and assistant. What she really wanted was to become a doctor too, but the old man thought that she would not find a job if she did. There were five doctors in our village among three thousand souls. They were not rich, but they were loved by everyone. And now that the old man was dead Josephine wanted to come

to England soon. She knew that her father had been an Englishman and she would not rest, she said, until she found him. Would she ever find him, I wondered, and would it be wise to try?

It was strange to think that it was only two or three months ago when we saw Josephine's mother off to a convent. What were we two young women to do when she asked us to carry her suitcase in the rain because she would not take the train as it was not in keeping with renunciation? We took turns carrying her case and by every wayside shrine we had to stop, for Martha insisted on saying the Stations of the Cross. It was sheer misery to us, especially to Josephine. After all, it is not a common thing for a young woman to see her mother off into an enclosed convent, a shabby little convent at that, a place not famed in any way, which held but a handful of women, daughters of small peasants and landowners, all of them dear innocents, chosen children of God, two of whom had been in there so long they had never seen a railway, only an aeroplane or two circling overhead, which, of course, they could not miss.

On the way, for the last time, Josephine pleaded with her mother to tell her who her father was, his name, anything, but Martha would not tell. She did not see the good of it. Besides, he had not been to blame. They had been very young.

As we approached the little convent standing on a hill, we could see the lake which looked like lead, endless little waves were licking the rocks, running along them, falling back again. It made us think of life in general. A silent happiness had come into Martha's eyes as she tied a spotted handkerchief round her head while she looked up to the inscription on the gate where it said *Christo in pauperibus*.

Eventually, a nun in a shabby, much patched habit, green with age, opened the gate and took us down a garden path.

It was not really a garden. Small, stubby old trees stood about here and there, gnarled elder bushes were dripping with wet. The loamy path was slippery. It seemed desolate. Wordlessly, we were led down a sanded passage, up a creaky staircase, into a tiny reception room crammed full with holy statues, oil paintings of incredibly yearning saints with martyred faces. A table fixed to the floor and a wooden bench along two walls were all the furniture.

I sat down to wait while Josephine followed her mother to her cell that had a small window looking down upon a little cemetery strewn with weather-beaten crosses. Josephine put her mother's few belongings into the one and only drawer of a dark little commode and took her leave. Martha begged her to be good, told her she would constantly pray for her and gave her the only pieces of jewellery she had; a little silver chain with a cross attached, which was given her in memory of her first Communion, also a narrow silver ring studded with blue stones which had been a present from 'that student'. Feeling deeply moved and very subdued, we dipped our fingers into the copper vessel at the door and sprinkled ourselves with holy water.

Outside, with awe, we looked up once more at the ancient building. There was not a sign of life. Most of the windows had their shutters tightly closed, the others were entirely covered with patched and threadbare curtains. Paint had flaked off long ago from the shingled walls, which looked dark grey and damp with age. Above us in the sky a bird of prey dipped low, uttering a piercing cry. We both watched it disappear behind the convent roof.

Josephine took my arm. 'I'll find him, some day,' she said, 'if it takes me years,' meaning her father. Why she bothered so passionately I could not understand. Perhaps it was that alien blood in her. She often dreamed, she said, of a polite and learned world as lived in large cities. We both



dreamed of England. I hoped to marry John quite soon. We both wanted to get out of our shut-in land and see for ourselves what the country was like which sent us all those tourists, who invariably had made an impression on us, tall, cool people, silent types, courageous and sometimes fool-hardy, always gentle, manly, a little isolated it seemed from anybody else.

The little townlet surrounding the sad little convent was as gay and colourful as a birthday cake. Little did the tourists know that but a few yards away a handful of women were leading apparently aimless lives, atoning and praying and working the same old way as others had done before them for centuries. The huge stone wall, the only part that was not crumbling and was kept in good repair, was like a curtain between ordinary living and that mysterious life behind those scaling shutters. You could, if you took the trouble, hear someone playing the organ.

Outside, strange wild tunes emanating from the Hotel Zur Linde floated through the air. Jazz. This was something new that had invaded our villages at last. 'Jazz,' said Josephine, 'from America.' It was not truly gay like our *Ländler* or our yodel songs, and nobody hereabouts understood why anyone should want to play such desperate music, using a piano, a trumpet and a percussion instrument. You felt convinced that those who had invented it had been tremendously frustrated and were obliged to protest with body and soul against the Universe. It made you want to return to the convent chapel and listen to the nun who was hidden from view playing Bach.

As we passed the Linde we saw elegant foreign women with their men sipping the rather sour wine grown on the slopes of the lower lake. Suddenly the orchestra stopped, paused for a moment and played something incredibly sweet,

gentle and unbelievably sad, which they called 'The Blues'. These too were tunes from another world, a shoddier one, only we did not know it. Words like 'Blue', 'True', English words which hardly anyone knew the meaning of, came from the mouth of an earnest, deeply frowning young man, the local postman, one of Josephine's uncles, who had been taking lessons in crooning from an Italian, who had recently returned from California completely penniless. It sounded like the distant lowing of a cow or the bellowing of a bull from afar, pure, innocent, and, of course, quite meaningless.

Once or twice we looked back to get another glimpse of the tall convent roof peeping up between some poplars. 'Like an isolation hospital, or like a workhouse,' said Josephine. Suddenly, overcome with grief, she wept. We both wept. We stood together in our grief, not only for Martha, but for we knew not what. 'It's all so final,' said Josephine wiping her eyes. It was indeed difficult to realize that her mother would now never return or walk on the road along the river again. We sat beneath the shrine in which Jesus was portrayed being sentenced to die, having the cross laid upon Him. But we did not pray. Even the fat little angels floating about, carved in wood surrounding the shrines, showing their chubby legs, did not change our mood.

As we neared our village, we passed the church and by the vicarage we saw one of our priests digging in the garden. As he straightened his back he saw us and came forward to open the gate. He knew well enough where we had been. The whole village knew.

Josephine wanted to escape, for he was not her favourite confessor. He would ferret out one's feelings as if feeding on one's sorrow, for which he had no answer, it seemed, but a burst of platitudes. He was a pompous little man, red-faced and chubby. Not unlike those cherubs on the shrines.

Rubbing his hands on his greenish soutane he said, 'Ah, my daughters! Ah, my poor Josephine! I am well aware, dear child,' he went on, as if he had rehearsed it, 'that today our dear God has willed that henceforth you will be alone in the world. An orphan. No doubt my child you will now realize the gravity of life. But don't despair, Josephine! Think of your dear mother, her silent happy walks in seclusion, praying for you constantly. Think how she will be able to look down upon the petty evils of life with complete indifference.'

'It's all right, Father,' said Josephine soothingly, 'I'm not despairing.' Her eyes strayed beyond the garden fence where herds of cows were driven past by young men, shouting as they went along. 'Father Thomas,' Josephine said, 'there is only one thing I want from you, please tell me who my father was. I know you have been told about him.'

'But my dear child,' he said, horrified, 'be reasonable. Think! We don't know where he lives, whether he is still alive. He was an Englishman remember, they've been at war. Besides, it would cause no end of an upset if you went to look for him, might cause no end of misery to an unknown family!'

'You will oblige me, reverend Father,' she repeated, 'by giving me my father's name. I have a right to know. I'll promise to cause no trouble or upset anywhere.'

'I'll see what I can do,' he said, closing the gate with a click behind us. 'I'm sure the time will come when you will realize that there is no sense in it. One does not look for old skeletons in one's cupboard. Let us look into our own hearts only and be satisfied.'

'Pompous old thing,' said Josephine.

It was still wintry up on the alp where Josephine's grandfather lived. One could not make half a mile an hour on that snow. Not that she cared for the old man, who had cut

her mother off when she needed him most. What she was after was to find the visitors' books of twenty years ago. Year by year her grandfather had had them bound in red leather, some of them so old they were already scaling.

In a lonely gully ravens bickered, a partly frozen brook came tumbling down and the Santis rose above us in solitary grandeur. We knew almost every nook and cranny, places where before long the meadows would bloom again, pushing their lovely flowers up through the snow, shining in white purity.

We came upon the hermit's hut. He was not a religious hermit as those of old, but a recluse, a solitary, and would have been a tramp had he lived in England. He had no money, no lamp, no books and no miracles were imputed to him. He was just poor, his only companions two goats. His hut was tucked away and a stranger could not easily have found it. He had a wife down in the village, a gay sort of woman, who was said to be carrying on with the blacksmith and others, but he had not seen her for years. He had a little brook all to himself that slipped over the rocks like an animal. For all he knew, he said, it ended up in the North Sea, for 'it did not tell him where it was going'. The old man scoffed when we told him that we were both going to England one of these days. He said he would have no foolish faith in places abroad where human beings changed everything into cash. Did we think we would ever return? What, if we stayed long enough, would prevent us from becoming strangers?

'Senile old man,' said Josephine, and I agreed, not knowing that some day I would remember.

Josephine's grandfather was not at home. But his second wife and her two daughters were assembled in the large room embroidering and singing, their backs to the old stove. They stopped when we entered and there was an

embarrassing silence. They did not think Josephine had any further rights in that house.

Josephine spread one or two of the books on the table, leafed through a couple of 'years', examining every inch of it. There were not many English names. Suddenly she beckoned to me and taking a faded snapshot which she had found crumpled at the back of one of her mother's drawers, she compared the signatures. The snapshot was signed A. R. Green. The writing was identical with that in the book. Some comic drawings adorned the page, done by the young man's friends, whose addresses were all the same, a London hospital. To judge by the drawings, some of them, it seemed, must have been drunk. They were funny, very medical and very rude.

We kept looking hopefully at the snapshot in front of us. It was of a pleasant, sporty-looking young man, holding his hands in his pockets, all wrinkled tweeds, and a pipe in his mouth. He was the kind of young Englishman most foreign girls fall for. He looked so very relaxed.

We shook hands all round politely and left the Gentian Inn, and looking down into the valley we knew ours was a perfect world, even though we were both hankering after England. It was indeed much nearer to the stars.

## Chapter Twenty-one

QUITE suddenly the following day, I had a pain in my side. It came and went, and by evening Mother had made all the arrangements for me to be taken to a nursing home. It was right in the noisiest part of the town. To be completely frank about it, I was distinctly frightened of the place. I heard of English people who were in the habit of visiting hospitals and surgeries just for the fun of it and who positively loved being looked after by the medical profession. They were made of sterner stuff than I.

‘Cheer up, darling,’ said John, patting me on the back, while I wondered what Mama would think. She had warned me more than once never to allow an English doctor to operate on me. It was not safe. I glanced up at the tall, grey building that was this famous nursing home, and suffered. Oh, how I suffered!

It was no use now having promised Mama not to let an English surgeon touch me. I had already broken many pledges since I had come to England. The first promise I made at the age of fifteen was when I signed the teetotal pledge, and the second when I signed another in the presence of two nuns promising never to expose my bosom by wearing low-cut evening dresses. They should have seen Mother, I

could not help thinking, at the time when she went to the Lord Mayor's ball. Mother, a completely respectable person, allowing her bust to rest deliriously free on top of a bunch of artificial roses without anybody getting in the least excited about it. 'It's not your clothes or your bodices,' the nuns had said, 'that count, but you.' It would be me that counted now and how I behaved in this emergency.

On the doorstep I begged John not to come in with me, for I could not bear to prolong the parting. John did look rather white and I put my hand on his shoulder, saying '*Du musst nicht traurig sein*,' remembering though, with a pang, that I had been requested by Mother and Father never, never to talk German. I then slammed the door on him as if someone had dragged me in by the hair.

For a moment I thought that I had come to the wrong place, for this was just like anybody's private house, Turkish carpets in the matron's office, silver vases full of roses. The matron said she was sorry but the only room she had just now was at the top of the house. When I got my breath on the landing, I saw myself in a glass and pulled myself together. Nobody was stirring. Everything was perfectly dead and still, almost holy like a Good Friday in Switzerland.

I was determined to behave with dignity and not to show my fear. The novice mistress had always pointed out that we should gain constant victories over ourselves. Besides, I was Swiss and decided to remember the heroes of our native land, but could think of only two. Tell and Winkelried. I could think of nothing to say, either, to that orderly who took me to my room. She lit a coal fire in the hearth while from the window I watched a whole world of people fall away into the dusk. It was as if the town had been built on smoke.

'What are those buildings there below us?' I asked the orderly.

'Factories mostly and offices. Used to be private houses long ago. There's an artist's studio on top of that building over there, and below there is our mortuary!'

As soon as I was tucked away in bed I wanted to weep into my pillow, for the evening silence of the city and the spluttering fire filled me with grief. Nothing, however, Sister Pelagia had always said, could be achieved without pain. However, I did not believe her! Then, rather hurriedly, came the surgeon, who had been playing golf. He was an odd-looking person, completely bald, and his face was as white as lard. After looking at me hard, having said 'How-do-you-do,' he asked me if I always looked as pale as that. I did not think I was as pale as he and I explained that my skin was a sort of magnolia at best and ochre at its worst. 'I see,' he said rather dryly.

The matron wanted to know why my husband had not taken my clothes away with him. It sounded ominous. Everybody was frightfully serious except the night-nurse who came in later; she made me get out of bed to show her how my dressing-gown looked on. It was heavily trimmed with gilded dragons and other *passementerie*. Greatly admired though I was by the nurse and another orderly who brought up another bucket of coal from the cellar five flights below, I remembered what I was here for.

The nurse who joined us, who was Irish, wanted to know if I would like a priest to call in the morning. This was all very sad and I decided to make my will before the tablet the nurse had given me put me to sleep. Not that I had anything much to leave.

'By the time you open this letter,' I started dramatically, 'I shall have gone from this earth.' Still having the Swiss habit of using pompous sentences, I went on, 'In your wakeful nights, darling John, when you have me no longer by your side to talk to, etc. etc.' As I read the letter again,



I was so deeply moved by it that I wept. Still writing on though, I told John how I felt about him, how full of love I was for him, on and on for seven pages. I also wrote my obituary, using the usual cliché, the way Swiss people do.

'It has pleased Almighty God, after a serious operation, to summon Lyse into eternity.'

Soon it was midnight. I took out my rosary from under the pillow. My beads clicked for a while and the glowing coal fell gently into the ashes.

When I awoke in the morning, a news-vendor stood at the foot of my bed trying to sell me a daily paper, as always full of scandal and bad news. He had a streaming cold. A window-cleaner followed him, put up his ladder and reached across my bed to clean the windows. He smiled at me encouragingly. How nice the working classes were!

Then followed two nurses with my doctor, whom I had only recently met. Tall, beautifully groomed, tremendously good-looking, he had a smile for everyone. The nurses preened themselves and fluttered round him like so many disturbed butterflies. He was Betty's doctor too. She said she was terribly gone on him. Turning his back on the nurses, he gently sat down on my bed. He was on the old side, though, about fifty, beautifully sunburnt. How brown his hands were, as brown as mine. But I could well imagine that he could drive some nurses mad with desire. This doctor really tried to know me. He was one of those, rare in the medical world, who really listened with great interest to all a patient had to say. Asking if I had slept well I told him I dreamt I was home again in Altbad and found it changed. It had sold itself to commerce and was littered with slag heaps and factories. You could smell the soot in the air. The streets were dirty, so were the meadows and the cattle and the glacier above. Even the minnows in the water were

veiled with smuts. I explained to him very carefully that even now the mountains were still with me and that this dream, which was a bad omen, had upset me very much.

After looking at me silently for a while, and picking up one by one the books I had brought with me, Rilke, Baudelaire, and *The Life of Saint Theresa*, and Saint Aloysius, he said that I should take up golf. 'Look at me,' he added, 'I play nearly every afternoon from two to four.' He let me feel his biceps, which were quite good for a doctor, but not outstanding, not as good as John's, who did not play golf. I said that I would rather lie on my back on a mountain top and dream that I was a bird floating in the wind. He wanted to know if I found Englishmen very stodgy and I said yes, but no more so than men anywhere, but that I liked them just the same.

An hour later, shivering a little, I walked down a buff-coloured corridor, dressed not in my lovely dressing-gown, but in a short chemise made of white towelling, tied at the back with tape, leaving a gap of several inches, large woollen socks and a common bathing cap, down two flights of steps into the operating theatre where the surgeon and the anæsthetist were waiting for me. I walked over to the surgeon and murmured that I was rather scared, but he did not respond. Perhaps he was scared as well. Nobody spoke. Feeling robbed of all dignity dressed as I was, I felt sure someone was walking over my grave, and wondered a little whereabouts that could be.

It was late in the afternoon when I found that I was still alive. It set me off speculating where my self, my spirit, had been while under the anaesthetic. Well, nobody had ever solved that problem and it did not now seem important. I was alive and life was wonderful, even here in strange old England. And here was John sitting by my side, wearing

that suit I had once taken to the tailors to be altered and which they had returned just as it was before. He brought his dear face down to mine and rested it on the pillow, but they did not let John stay long. The doctor, who came later in the evening, who was so good-looking that he set most women's hearts aflutter, was allowed to stay much longer. He brought me some books by Jane Austen, which, he said, were much saner and more suitable for young women like myself to read than that stuff on the bedside table.

When Betty arrived, looking rather dashing wearing a hat with a spotted veil, she stood for a moment surveying the scene. Dr. Percy, with his impeccable linen suit, who eyed her from her top to her high-heeled shoes in a semi-professional manner, seemed to electrify Betty so that she spoke with a louder voice than usual. She brought out her cigarettes and moved over to the looking-glass, which was hidden from my view so that I should not be able to see how white I looked and get depressed. Dr. Percy said he was sorry but he had to go, and as he left Betty said it was an awful pity for such a wonderful specimen of manhood as Dr. Percy to have married a religious woman.

Betty had brought me a small bottle of French brandy from which she made me take a gulp or two, drinking almost all the rest herself. Then she walked over to the window and noticing the mortuary, she said, 'Crikey, it makes you think.' Then she complained how dead the town was and how little there was to do in the evenings unless one entertained. There was nothing but bed—and George did not lie in bed to think. She quite warmed to this theme while I listened to her with parted lips, thinking of my countrywomen to whom talking sex was strictly taboo, my Aunt Marie, her dour husband, so very prim and proper, or my Aunt Ida, so incredibly frigid, always looking for sin. Then the surgeon put his head in at the door, but when he saw that I had company, he went

away again. 'He reminds me,' said Betty, 'of one of those corpses painted by Goya.'

From my bedside she picked up some of the poetry I had brought with me. 'There's no accounting for taste,' she said. What she would like to know was what John, who was such an outdoor man, thought of it all. I said that I was sorry to say that he did not much care for poetry either.

'Well,' she said, 'thank your lucky stars for that. You don't want one of those Divines, those Mystics, those types that melt in your hands. Like chocolate. Besides,' she added, 'what is poetry when all is said and done? Translate it into ordinary language and it says precisely nothing.'

Perhaps it was the brandy that made me imagine I had arrived in Byzantium, where everybody had a poet's mind. When I awoke, Betty had gone. I grew very fond of Betty and how I envied her. She had not the slightest need to be loved or understood. It did not seem to bother her.

I wrote to Mama.

I have news for you. I had my appendix taken out in the most expensive nursing home in town. The whole place is incredibly lugubrious. I would much rather have gone into the ordinary hospital, a very up-to-date place, but Mother did not think anyone of 'our class' could be treated in an ordinary ward. This is the first time in my life I have found myself belonging to a specific set of people. I find it very confusing. I have noticed, of course, that, unlike at home, there are differences here of people existing in the most glaring contrasts. Father calls his gardener Jones, and his book-keeper Millar, not Mister Jones or Mister Millar as we would at home. Not that all this matters to me since I am Swiss.

I have a very nice doctor, very good-looking. His

name is Percy Cedric Black. It sounds like a girl's name but he is very masculine. John comes to see me every evening and talks about exercise. He believes that had I taken more exercise I would not have had a sick appendix. The idea!

One of the orderlies told me that her mother had some internal organ removed which left such a gap inside her that she was in constant danger of losing the rest of herself. This made me laugh and later, owing to my condition, I began to worry and burst into tears. They call this hysteria in England which is something to be deeply ashamed of. Like being dirty.

I have just been up for the first time and walked along the upper landing. From there I could see the railway sidings and men digging in the black soil along the canal, looking for Heaven knew what, hidden treasures or worms. There is a bust of Tolstoy on one of the window-sills apparently looking into the distance where factories are weaving laces and cloth. Everything is black and there seems no hope of anyone ever making a living without working inside those dismal places. I wonder what Tolstoy would have made of it.

And now I must close because I can hear Mother talking to the matron downstairs in her high-pitched voice.

Mother was out of breath after climbing all those stairs and her toque, which looked like a Gruyère cheese, so flat and round and unbecoming sitting straight on her head, had slipped sideways. She brought me a large brown cake. She had seen the recipe in *Home Chat*. There was only one egg in it, which Mother thought sensible considering the price of eggs. Mother liked to talk of cooking, recipes and household things. She could easily use up an afternoon on such subjects

and no one else needed to speak at all. I said that my mama once used thirty-two eggs in one single cake. I was slapped down hard and told about the need for economy. I could tell that she did not consider Mama to be a serious person after that.

Well, here sitting close to me was Mother with her large stodgy cake and I was trying to talk to her, trying to have a conversation, which was difficult between two people forced constantly to draw on all their charity.

Mother was generous though in other ways. She picked up the nursing home account from the bedside table and said that she would pay it. She held it close to her eyes and read out the detailed list aloud. So many guineas for drugs and cotton-wool, so many guineas for the use of the 'theatre'. I was never one for grasping the nettle, to enjoy reading bank statements and opening bills. But Mother, like Betty, had her feet on the ground. It filled me with a sense of guilt towards her. We drank the watery tea the nursing home supplied and ate the water biscuits too, Mother, as always, sitting upright looking very dignified, her diamond rings flashing now and then as she moved her hands. Then the surgeon looked in once more and Mother, who knew him socially, gave him a very accomplished smile. His complexion was still the shade of wash-leather, whereas mine had now vastly improved. Together they went over to the fire and there, in whispers, they talked with their backs turned to me.

After Mother left, kissing me on both cheeks, the surgeon, who according to the orderly had a touch of the tarbrush, which I imagined to be a strange kind of disease, came and sat on my bed. He told me of a brain operation he had just performed in the city hospital, describing it in detail. Funnily enough, Englishmen did tell me that sort of thing every now and again, whereas they would not have told

Mother. When it came to having a real talk, foreigners seemed to be easier to tell things to—or else talking about intricate surgery was his way of making me feel at ease. I asked him how bad my appendix had been and he said that the operation had not really been necessary, that that sort of thing happened now and then.

For a while, neither of us had anything further to say. I wished I could have told him everything about myself, right from the beginning, but I never opened up to Mother's friends. By the door, he turned. 'All right,' he said, coming back, standing at the foot of my bed, 'suppose you tell me all about it. You've got to get it off your chest some time. You're not very happy here, are you? Well,' he added, since I did not know what to say, 'I am not surprised. Take my advice and go as far away from your in-laws as you can, or else make up your mind to have a baby.' Then, just to change the subject quickly, which seems quite an art in England, he said, 'Isn't it a lovely evening?'

I felt so happy I wanted to laugh as I watched him, small, swarthy, rather ugly in an interesting way, looking into all the corners, wondering where he had left his hat. I knew that I would always remember him with great affection.

## Chapter .Twenty-two

THE party at Eleanor's was quite fun in a strange and, what I thought, un-English way. Not that her house and furniture were much different from any other house I had been in. The usual three-piece suite of green chenille, the usual carpet with floral design, the usual chintz curtains. Supper was laid in the dining-room, ham sandwiches, sardines, potato crisps, a trifle, everything very dainty and refined. Some ferny plants stood on the sideboard.

I remembered Mama, who said that one should not be frivolous in company unless one was among old friends, and that one should create the impression of having had a proper education. Perhaps other mountainous countries whose people had sprung from the peasant class were like that too, they were in love with culture. Almost every young man became a doctor of something or another, which made them very prone to logic, and precise. They wrote incredibly clever articles in magazines and papers, entirely free of love or sentiment, and they expected their girl companions to be very serious and splendid listeners, able to join in now and then, however confused they might be inwardly.

A strange mixed company assembled round the table, a young curate, who smiled and smiled and twitched his



eyebrows most of the time because, Eleanor said, he was a nervous wreck since he had, when a missionary in China, fallen from a wall into a dump of baby corpses. There was a solicitor too, who spoke a little French. He knew a few phrases only and his accent was beyond belief. '*Mon oncle,*' he whispered in my ear, '*couche avec ma tante!*' There was also a salesman, who travelled in gas cookers, and a very pretty and rather chatty blonde who promptly cottoned on to John. John was the kind of young man who invariably attracted chatty girls, brought up as he was by a chatty mother to be attentive and polite.

The curate asked me to call him Basil. Everyone used their Christian names. I was just about to embark on a serious conversation with him about life, his church and its creed, which Mother rejected in part, and how it was that she was free to do so, and about the Holy Trinity and how such problems were often on my mind since Mother wanted me to take her faith, which I found entirely confusing. It was impossible. Eleanor had put on the radio-gramophone and Basil and I began to dance in an entirely novel way, cheek to cheek, up and down the hall and passage to the kitchen.

Betty, in her pink dress and slightly flushed, jumped to her feet and began to dance a solo. The carpet had been rolled back. 'Strip-tease,' she shouted, 'everyone,' pulling off her bolero, her shoes, clicking her fingers and kicking up her legs. Someone pulled down her zip fastener at the back and her hair fell over her eyes. Her dress began to slip off her shoulders and quietly I said good-bye to those articles I had prepared for the fortnightly paper at home, describing the British, their lack of liveliness, their strange distinctions. This was another world in which I did not seem able to compete. It grew hot in Eleanor's drawing-room. A grand piano filled nearly a third of the space, an enormous sofa

was occupied by three couples making love. 'Larking,' John said was what they called it. It all seemed very sexy to me.

Just then Leslie grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into the dining-room. 'No kissing please,' I said anxiously, and he said, 'Lord, why not, that's what we are here for.' But in the dining-room, the sofa was already occupied by the solicitor and a lecturer's wife cuddling hard. The solicitor said, 'Sorry, engaged, and please turn out the light.'

'Let's go upstairs,' said Leslie.

'Oh no!' I cried, and he said, 'Don't be so provincial, don't you have any fun at all in your benighted country?'

'Of course,' I said, a little hurt. But I could not explain. Ever since the reformation, girls in our valleys had been warned off sex, so that even Catholic ones were frequently conscious of sin when there was no real need. When thoughts of sex invaded our minds, we were taught to think of work instead. Work was holy. It quietened the conscience. Perhaps temperamentally we were unable to lark. You could not toy with our men. Calling myself a prig and a spoil-sport, I then kissed Leslie on his cheek and said, 'Sorry, Leslie, I can't do more than that.' He vaguely slapped my back and went off with a short 'Excuse me' to see what the chatty blonde was doing. The blonde girl and John were partly hidden by the curtains on the window seat. Whatever was John up to, I wondered rather anxiously.

Betty had just finished showing us how to pick up a bottle from the floor with her teeth, bending backwards. Nobody cared very much to imitate her. George, who was looking on without much interest, refilled my glass with sweet port, the first time I have ever tasted it. Slowly getting dazed by this deceptive drink, I wanted still more urgently to talk to Basil about his convictions about the resurrection of the dead, the stars, and what he thought made a saint, and of the Real Presence, but someone turned out all the lights. Someone

grabbed my hand and pushed me to the door and up the stairs. When we reached the landing, I was in a cold sweat, experiencing a feeling of acute anxiety and a sense of sin. Eventually, all was still. My companion, who still held my hand, told me that this was a game of hide and seek and to lie down and slip underneath a bed, one of those iron bedsteads high off the ground. He lay down beside me, his arm heavily across my chest. It became very hot and my companion said, 'Hush darling, not a sound.' There were other people in the room with us, some on top of the bed, and whispers appeared to come from the inside of a wardrobe. Those on the bed tossed and giggled, and a veil of dust spread over my face. I was now being kissed and to my horror, I did not seem to mind. I was sure it was the curate, for he smelled of Egyptian cigarettes. I was devastated. Being brought up with the idea that young curates had an entirely scholarly and celibate attitude to life, I thought the situation very interesting. 'Oh don't, Leslie,' someone on the bed was whispering, and 'Don't you dare.' I began to feel rather drowsy and when Basil kissed me again, I was not in the least embarrassed. I thought to myself, let him do as he likes if it gives him pleasure.

Then suddenly, the lights were switched on again and the game was over. The curate crept out and helped me to my feet. He looked a little shy, waiting silently and almost reverently for me to speak. Then he looked down on to his shoes, which were very pointed. 'Don't look so troubled,' he said quietly as I stood by his side, 'it's all in the game.' 'Of course,' I said, feeling rather sorry for him now, for anyone could see that at heart he was as inexperienced as I.

John appeared from somewhere on the third floor, looking frankly sleepy, and the little chatty blonde, with the vermilion backless gown, made up her face and combed her

hair. She turned her back on John. Perhaps she had found him dull and unenterprising. I hoped so anyway.

We walked home in the dark as it was not far to go. In my hand I had a couple of large balloons on sticks, just like a child, and after walking along in silence I asked John what was the truth about the British and John said he did not know what I meant.

'Did you kiss that girl?' I asked a little later as he unlocked the front door.

'What girl?' he said.

'Oh, you know the one I mean.'

John laughed. 'What do you expect!' he said.

This was not a proper answer either. I imagined John hiding under a spare-room bed with the pretty blonde, feeling at home with her because she was English and, who knows, regretting his alien, romantic and over-thoughtful wife, who was apparently unable to enjoy her life 'while she had it'. But when John squeezed my hand, I felt completely reassured. What a dangerous game though 'Sardines' was, or would be if played with my countrymen.

It had all been so exciting that I could not sleep. I rose and walked about the house and made myself some coffee. John was already fast asleep. I thought of the curate too and how, when he kissed me, I had responded. Did I fall in love too readily? Could one feel a kind of affection for two men at once? How very unsettling. No Swiss husband would stand for it. His wife may dance with other men, now and then, but she must not let them maul her.

Back in the bedroom John awoke, asking solicitously if I was all right. 'Here,' he said, 'let me tuck you in.'

## Chapter Twenty-three

SOMETIMES, when sitting by the window knitting John some sensible socks, seeing young women going by to play golf, I wondered if anyone would ever ask me to join the three arts club, or the music club, or any other club which seemed, all of them, to be run by Mrs. Hemmingway, or Aunt Ethel, or one of those important women who found it so difficult to smile at me. Like a hawk or a *Lämmergeier*, I was free. But it was a lonely freedom. Under the roof of the house opposite, where two old ladies lived alone, some swallows had built a nest. They were teaching their babies to fly. Oh, what are you doing there little swallows, so very far from the cliffs of the Kreuzberge, or the eaves of my papa's homestead, where the little garden in front would be crowded now with forget-me-nots, and where white convolvulus was crawling up the fences of red-currant and gooseberry bushes!

As I sat daydreaming, I noticed a taxi draw up by the garden gate, which had recently come off its hinges and was now leaning against the lime tree. A lady in a gay little hat came up the garden path, stopping for a moment to look at my pink and red roses growing up high on the pergola. It was Mama! I rushed out and hid my face on

her shoulder. It seemed like a dream. She held me at arm's length and, because I had lost a little weight, said dramatically, 'My God, what have they done to you?'

Mama was fun, even when she was dramatic. She flopped down on the sofa and talked and laughed a lot, saying how she had had another of her premonitions and several dreams about me, so that Papa urged her to come and see what kind of environment I was now living in. Like lightning, Mama's eyes took in all there was, the children playing hopscotch on the avenue, the houses opposite which seemed asleep in the afternoon, looking blind; my dim, dark brown curtains, the gaudy ceramics Aunt Lucy, who had no taste, but whom I loved, had given me. And then her gaze rested on me again. It was embarrassing. I knew I would have to be on the defensive now, pledged as I was to England willy-nilly. She said that on her journey north from London she felt that one might become attached to the bleak, flat land in time. It had a kind of awful fascination. I said I would not really call it bleak.

Soon Mama wanted to know all about John, what was he earning, what were his thoughts about the future, what were his hobbies now he could not ski.

'Well,' I said, 'he bought a tandem.'

'A tandem. What's a tandem?'

When I showed her the thing leaning against the kitchen window she was not greatly impressed. She did not think it would be in my line. She did not like the house either. 'Too elongated,' she said. However, it did not make her laugh!

'Oh, darling,' she kept on saying, 'how thin you are. I suppose it's the food or something. Not enough calories. What did you have for lunch, might I ask?'

'Shepherd's pie,' I said.

'Whatever's that?'

'Cooked meat minced up, baked in the oven with a crust on top. It's one of Mother's specialities.' Mama muttered something about English cooking and made for the stairs to see her bedroom. I would so have loved to chat about all the happenings and tell her how dreadfully I minded this and that, but did not want to be disloyal to John's people.

Mama was excited. For years, ever since she had read Galsworthy, she had been longing to visit England and get to know the people. She viewed the iron bedstead but made no comment. From her window she saw our neighbours on both sides, minus their spats, snipping their hedges. Both of them were thin and gaunt, had long straight legs and no buttocks at all. You could have told that they were Englishmen anywhere in the world. 'Dried out,' said Mama, but I was not so sure. 'Wait till you see them smile,' I said, 'it changes them entirely.'

Mama went to her room to put on her best frock in order to make a good impression on my new friends and family, for she imagined that there would be a host of people wanting to meet her. Surely, she said, there would be some relations dropping in, offering their solidarity? I tried to convince her that she must forget Galsworthy and that even if John's aunts would drop in uninvited, which was not likely, we would have very little to say to each other. These aunts were not only alike in looks, but so incredibly alike in outlook that one could be certain about their reactions to any remark we might make. So unlike my aunts at home. Aunt Ida, for instance, who had followed the teachings of innumerable German philosophers, which made her lose her faith in the hereafter, having drunk too deeply from the fountains of learning until even virtue had lost its flavour and she had taken to sipping sweet Spanish wine.

Or my Aunt Joan, who made herself a household slave and

a slave to her garden. She lived like a nun without ever leaving her walled-in villa, which she filled with Persian carpets, jade ornaments, and photographs of her son, who was an officer on the General Staff and looked like a Prussian, with a duelling scar across his cheek. Or my Aunt Lucy, who felt that God had given her a vocation to heal the sick. Perhaps He had. If anyone came to tell Aunt Lucy of their secret griefs she did not feign deafness or laugh it off as those English aunts would have done. You could not laugh things off at Altbad without being considered callous or inhuman, if not downright insane.

Outside it began to drizzle hard, just so that we were not taking the English summer for granted.

'What about Mother,' asked Mama. 'Is she kind to you?'

'Of course,' I said, 'in her way. She buys me tweeds and woollen undervests, pink knickers with machine-made lace on them, and a lot of malt extract. She also attaches great importance to lying down in the afternoon, to putting one's feet up.'

'What, at your age?'

'You see she thinks if you are married and likely to become pregnant, that being on one's legs all day might possibly lead to a prolapse, whatever that is.' Mama did not laugh.

'And what is malt extract supposed to do to you?'

'It's supposed to put colour in my cheeks.'

'Whatever for?' I had been pale all my life.

'They think I am too sallow.'

'Fiddlesticks,' said Mama. '*Blödsinn*' was what she actually said. 'Why don't they leave you alone,' Mama went on, 'to be yourself?'

Then Mama said she had brought me a present from Papa, and after rummaging in her bag, she brought out a return



ticket for home, valid three months. Now Papa should not have done that. He knew I was apt to run away from one place to another. Running away from home to go into the convent, and then running away from there wanting John and to see the world, had not yet taught me that places were only symbols.

Silently we warmed our toes by the electric fire, but it was not restful sitting with my Mama. She kept on looking at me sideways as if wondering whether I was still the same changeling, or whether this was now all the spring-time life was ever going to offer me, this quaint house in a suburb, this narrow garden with all those geraniums which looked as if they wanted to laugh out loud but did not dare. Her eyes fell on to the mantelshelf, the Madonna with the Baby and the platter on which it said, 'My Fatherland to Thee'.

I was much relieved when Eleanor and Betty called and blew Mama's ideas about the British sky-high, the same as they had done to me. Mama, who used, when still single, to go to Italy visiting famous galleries and was mad about culture, and had a nice little room of her own with a window that looked onto a dreaming pinewood and the mountains, was given to illusions about life in a city, for which she was forever impatient as she thought that there one would lead a richer life, asked Betty if this was an interesting town, and Betty said, 'Like Hell it is.' She began to describe a lecture on art she had just attended, mimicking the lecturer who, she said, 'looked as if someone had just cut him down from the gallows.' He had been a 'Modern' and had talked about something 'transcendental which was manifesting itself in the latest trends,' and had invited them all to note 'the apocalyptic figures and primeval phenomenons of the present times and the colours which clashed so very cleverly.' Yes, Aunt Ethel had been there too and Mrs. Hemmingway.

She had, she said, rarely seen such discontented women. 'Starved of love, or something.'

Eleanor, after staring rather at the Madonna, took her knitting from her bag, saying that she was 'expecting another, worse luck,' and that it would most likely be 'another bandy-legged monster like Leslie.' Oh, I sighed, why couldn't I treat life like an enormous joke, the same as they! Mama was intrigued by them. I tried to explain to her after they had gone that they were of another generation and that there was no humbug about them.

It was wonderful when John came home and turned The Pines into a sane and friendly house, peaceful and completely normal. He said he was very pleased to see Mama, calling her 'Mama' too, the same as I. Being Swiss, she let him run his own affairs and never gave him any advice. She had a great deal of wisdom where men were concerned.

Mother was of the opinion that Mama ought to learn all about the town, which was to be my town too by and by. She was quite passionate about it and spoke of everything with pride and reverence. So for several days on end we looked at the university, the high and low churches up and down narrow streets, and the embankment by the river, which smelled strongly of rawhides, where the statue of a plain little queen had been put to rest, to the very edge of the city where scores of buses waited for their return journey through the town. We were shown the electric power station, enveloped in smoke, the gas department, the offices of the income-tax inspector, not so friendly a place as the one in Altbad, and the city hospital. We were also shown the parks, two thousand acres of them. They were magnificent and I was proud of them, their natural beauty, their vastness, their lack of fussiness, the wind that sighed softly through the arms of the oaks and the branches of the

cedars of Lebanon, and the lawns like carpets on which you were allowed to walk and leave your picnic litter if you wanted to. In one of them was a monument of a gentleman standing on a pedestal, his left hand on his chest and his right hand holding a lump of coal. It made us realize how important coal was hereabouts and how eternally difficult it must be for an artist always to know what to do with people's hands. There were thousands of geraniums as well, louder, more clashing than my own. Mother ignored them. She also ignored the loving couples embracing under the lime trees.

We kept meeting people Mother knew whom she introduced to Mama. Nearly all of them said what nice weather we were having and how did she like England. Mama, who was a lover of light, usually looked up to the sky to see if the sun was really out, and into the middle distance, where a palish blue cast the narrow streets into a kindly twilight. Mother showed us the elms which had been planted on the square outside the Town Hall several years ago, which, however, did not seem to have grown much since. Later, Mother insisted on showing us the family grave, the outsize tombstone with an angel poised for flight, its wings extended wide. 'There is room in it for three more of us,' she said. Serenely confident that we had nothing like it in our country, Mother also showed us the shunting yard from the castle wall, where if you were alone and dreaming, you could listen to the silence of centuries and you could imagine that you could hear the crumbling of the past. It was impressive to be sure. Hundreds of railway lines converged where thick black smoke rose, making the scene look like Hades to a mere Swiss.

We called on Father too in his office. It was in one of those shabby places where Englishmen often do their business. No heavy carpets, no orchids on the desk to impress

buyers with, no bottles of wine in the cupboard, just tea in slightly cracked cups. Father pointed to a painting on the wall of one of his ancestors who made a fortune in the trade, had lived like a lord and then died penniless. Mama picked up her cup and waved it to Father with a smile. And then I laughed because suddenly everything seemed terribly funny. Father said, looking at Mama, that he thought I was a very strange girl, and Mama said she could not see why. Then Mother spoke to Mama about John, saying what a good son he was, making him sound very uninteresting to Mama, who liked a man who went off the rails occasionally one way or another.

Soon the town was almost deserted. All the men were streaming home to their wives and families, none of them lingering on the way in restaurants to have a game of cards as they did at home. Mama was intrigued. She had always been told that Englishmen were as cold towards their women as a slab of fish! 'Well,' I said, 'they are not, thank God.'

Mama kept hoping to meet our important aunts who had accompanied the King and Queen. She had thought it would be like in Altbad where everyone was gay and curious to meet newcomers to the family and wanted to know all about them. In her mind's eye, she said, she saw innumerable British housewives in jolly aprons, singing in their kitchens songs like 'No John, no John, no John, no'. 'Nothing of the kind,' I said. There seemed to be no songs. No errand boys, even, whistling in the streets. It was pretty dull. There were, of course, very many warm-hearted people who were extraordinarily good to down-and-outs, to dogs, and to penniless aliens seeking work, and starving people far away in China, but aliens in the family was another thing. Mama gazed at me rather sadly

and in a subdued voice asked how I would ever be able to adapt myself. I said it would come in time when, after a few years, I would be one of them.

After that, Mama said she would just be able to stand it another week, no longer. She fell to counting her money and thought she would have enough left to buy me another sofa—one that did not ping.

Mama frequently went out into the garden hoping to relieve the tedium. It was a long, long garden going up and back some fifty yards, but was only five yards wide. Often she watched a young married man, who lived at thirty-eight and was said to be an intellectual, roller skating up and down the avenue. Mama was not sure whether this was a manly thing to do, or something under the heading, Sport. Wonderful things like this happened now and then in England and no one cared. You could not have done that in Altbad either.

Almost every morning, beams of sunshine came through dark grey clouds, reminding me of a picture in the convent's cloisters, God sitting on a cloud like a featherbed, looking down upon the distant globe, letting the bright light of eternity shine down upon a lonely earth. The maidservant next door was singing loudly, 'My bonnie lies over the ocean', and the cuckoo clock in the dining-room struck five. I would have to make a steamed pudding for John, for that was, his mother said, what he needed 'to fill that large frame of his', as if he were a packing case.

Mama spoke to Mrs. Hall as she left for home. Mrs. Hall said it was 'perishin' weather for the time of year'. She had already once or twice assured Mama that she did not mind foreigners and thought them human beings the same as anyone. But she did not much care for them geraniums in

the front, they were all right for them that liked garish colours, they made her think of blood.

The best thing about living in the suburb, said Mama, was that there was virtually nothing much to do and one could sleep and sleep. No doubt it would grow on one in time. Just then, the telephone rang.

‘Darling,’ a charming male voice said, ‘are you alone?’

‘Yes, darling,’ I said, ‘and I am desperately in need of some excitement. I feel terribly depressed just now.’ There was a moment’s silence.

‘It’s you, isn’t it?’ the voice went on.

‘Of course it’s me, darling.’

‘But you sound different, you know.’

‘Sorry, but I’ve just had all my teeth out.’

There was silence at the other end and I quickly hung up. Since I was still a nobody and my telephone rang but rarely, it was exciting even to be rung by mistake.

When the week-end came, we took Mama down to the east coast in John’s old car, one of those shabby cars Englishmen don’t mind being seen in ‘as long as the engine is working properly’. Soon, after about sixty miles, John said we would be able to smell the salt in the wind. Mama and I drew deep breaths of air with something new and fresh in it.

I liked to imagine muscular Romans marching along this road to the coast, or bearded Vikings arriving across the North Sea to kidnap the local women. How much more exciting invasions were in the past.

John had to concentrate on driving the slightly crooked car as the steering wheel was apt to come off in his hand. Mama thought this very odd and casual, and very English of course. I looked at Mama and was glad that I was able to show her a fresher world full of novelty. I could see that

she took an almost morbid interest in the shabbier places we rode through and what she thought the strange ignorant life that went on in them, women shopping wearing curlers, looking bored and glum, or tall arrogant-looking ladies walking along with browbeaten husbands, and tiny dogs on a lead. John was not in the least offended at Mama's running commentary. Like most Englishmen he was used to living with a certain amount of ugliness and did not expect any birds of paradise to come floating across fields of turnips, or Amazonian butterflies to hover over moss-covered gravestones in village churchyards. I knew I had a lot to learn from John.

Soon Mama complained about the wind. Did it always blow like that across the country? It fairly rushed at us and made the car rock like a ship. The climate certainly was not favourable to Mama's elaborate hair-style. She had been fortunate never having had to live with gales blowing round the houses. 'What would we do, I ask you, without the wind?' I said. 'There would be no beautiful clouds floating over the Santis and rain would only fall upon the sea and the glaciers from where it rose. Just look at that buzzard in the upwind, hovering without moving its wings.' Mama did not care about buzzards and what made them poise in the sky. Her nose was red and, trembling a little with cold myself, I dared not yet tell her that John had packed two tents and three folding beds in the back of the car meaning us to camp out somewhere. I knew only too well that Mama would much rather sleep at the Ritz. Already she wanted to know if there was anywhere we could get a good meal. John pointed to a wayside inn and said that we would stop there, and Mama, who imagined that this would supply her with local colour, said, 'Yes, let's.'

John, like so many keen cyclists, was an eccentric driver. He came to a sudden halt in front of the King's Arms

within an inch of a charabanc. Inside, drinking beer, were a large group of fat women with large black handbags. Mama, who caught their breath, wondered why English beer still smelt so very strongly once it had been consumed. There was no nonsense about these women, they laughed loudly in an earthy way, devouring enormous bready sandwiches. Mama refused a glass of beer. She examined the inside of her sandwich, saw a lettuce leaf, a shaving of cheese and refused that too. John brought her a dripping cup of tea and a tin spoon, saying no other meals could be had along this route and she had better eat what there was.

A little subdued, but feeling warm again, we continued for several miles seeing some wonderful fields of rhododendrons, and later, an entirely treeless flat area where seagulls followed a farmer's plough. 'How melancholy,' sighed Mama. I found it strangely stirring, like the novels of a writer I had read when still at school, a man called Frenssen, whose heroines had been reared in almost treeless wolds and marshes, which made them so silent that they never uttered more than a word or two at any time. It had been the kind of place in my cosmos I had always wanted to reach. Even when I was a novice at the Convent of the Sacred Heart about to renounce the world I had, when feeding the ducks by the river, dreamt of floating away on the water, far out to sea. The North Sea. And here it was. We could hear, but not see it yet.

We had left all the arrangements to John, and to Mama's consternation he began to pitch the tents immediately after the car came to a standstill beside a dyke beneath a willow tree. There were the dunes. Out of sight, but only a few yards away, was the sea. The tide was in, the sea was rough and took to the air apparently, moistening everything around us with fine spray. Mama wrapped a blanket round her and shivered. Were we really going to spend a night



here in the open 'below sea-level', Mama shouted, 'like savages in Africa?'

A ghostly mist crept along the dykes and the yellow grass on the dunes took on a cold blue tint. The gigantic waves that were shooting against the breakwater, making jagged edges to the coastline, had a considerable effect on Mama. They were a warning, she said, of what would eventually come to England if we did not look out. She had got the idea so well fixed in her head that she could not shake it loose. We were living below the ocean bed, an ocean that would not stay in its proper place forever—not if the Arctic ice began to melt, which was bound to happen one day. It made us feel quite mean to laugh at her. She went quickly to sleep though when we returned from the local inn, wading through some sticky black clay to our little tents.

At dawn, we were woken by gulls calling to each other in hoarse syllables. Monstrously large cows, Friesians, came staring at us almost reproachfully. They were not the jolly sort of animals, bubbling with good spirits and curiosity, like those small brown cows we had at Altbad.

When it grew warmer families of grasshoppers invaded the dunes. Mama was watching John, who was wearing a dirty pair of shorts, messing about on the mudbanks, mud as black as tar, looking for crabs. I knew what she was thinking. He was a strange husband for me. A gentleman, anyone could tell, a gentleman all over, nice to look at too with broad shoulders, always carrying things for us women, behaving as if he were offering us the rarest of experiences by making us camp out on a damp lonely field, giving comfort with one hand and taking it away with the other.

Soon, we took to the road again, visiting several churches on the way, all reputed to be the oldest in England. Some were almost roofless. Ruin seemed to have passed over the

religious splendour of the past. Meadows, lit with luminous dandelions and clover, surrounded these churches, which were dreaming their lives away alone since the villages that had once squatted around them had all but disappeared. More Friesian cows stood about munching, as if they were chewing away the very centuries. It made me feel terribly sad. Walking through a churchyard I felt haunted. It made me think of Time and ghostly hands reaching out to me of long dead people asking to be resurrected.

John was whistling quite cheerfully though and Mama, who had no desire to inspect lintels, sat in one of those tall worm-eaten pews watching pigeons fly in and out through gaps in the roof from which the lead had vanished long ago. Mama was an active person, she had to keep moving. Things falling to pieces held no interest for her. She wanted to see the seaside town near by.

Driving up a street full of amusement arcades, the kind entirely unknown in her country, Mama showed her approval like a child. Everything took her eye, the trolleys which took people from one end of the promenade to the other, the fervour with which grown men were playing with a ball. So childish really! Didn't John think it infantile, she asked him, whereat he only smiled. Englishmen, I noticed, were invariably polite when you made remarks like this. Very clever of them too.

In whichever direction we went we came back to the sea—or what was the sea when the tide was in. Small bungalows looked like toys and Mama asked John were they made of cardboard. People were sprawling on dirty sand, old people sitting like statues were nodding in shelters. Young people lying about in the sandhills were making love and Mama said that it did not look as though there were as many wasted virgins in England as in the mountain regions at home.

The Pines seemed very still after Mama had gone, leaving me with the ticket propped up on the bookshelf against the Madonna. She also left me with an enlarged photograph of my celestial brother whom I could no longer remember. How bored I was with this angelical baby. I went up into the attic to think.<sup>4</sup> It was nice to be under the roof looking down on to thousands of chimneys, like being on the ground floor to Heaven.

I started to brush my hair in front of the clouded swivel mirror, looking closely at my complexion, giving it some real thought for the first time in my life. When I was seven, Robert, the painter, had said that to an artist human faces were either green or pink. Mine certainly seemed to be green. Some magic in the British air, I hoped, would make it rosy by and by. I powdered my nose and put a little rouge on my finger and smeared it over my cheek bones. It seemed to make me look a great deal older. I was getting thin I noticed too. My bust was no longer one of the outstanding things on me. This did not worry me though as it would have done had I married a Swiss with a keen eye to such assets.

I took out my diary and having completely forgotten that there had been times when I felt I could not stand Altbad nor the convent any longer and yearned to get away from it, I wrote:

I'd like to be able to peep into the chapel of the Convent of the Sacred Heart at benediction and linger a while watching the faces of the nuns which had always reminded me of saxifrage, that little alpine flower, so frail and yet so strong. Boldly I would like to soar above Altbad like a hawk, so high, until the conifers looked like moss beneath me. I'd like to go a pilgrimage to the monastery of Ensiedeln with my friend Jose-

phine, where very many years ago Christ himself came down with his angels and his saints to perform the ceremony of consecration. Not that this was easy to believe, but it sounds a most delightful idyll to me now, living in another age apparently.

When I read this over again, I said to myself that perhaps I suffered what the Swiss called the malady of poets. I pulled myself together. I was a married woman now and such languors as these were definitely immature. I resolutely started bustling round the house, filling the time with tremendous nothings, stoking the boiler, singing '*Oh Mein Heimatland*', playing the piano and cleaning John's brown boots. John was cross though when he came home; being English, he did not want me to clean his shoes.

He went into the yard to oil the tandem and after supper we cycled out into the gentle rain, wrapped as usual in oilskins, John talking about the World War as we passed the war memorial, going back over the Afghan War, to the Zulu War, the Boer War and other wars, and how Queen Victoria came to be Empress of India.

## Chapter Twenty-four

OFTEN when that young Irish priest started out on his bicycle to do some visiting and he went down Red Lion Street, which was rather slummy and full of many people who did not much care whether he called or not, he would turn off by the almshouses and make up his mind to call on me instead, so he said. He did not come to offer strength of mind, but because he was a very lonely man; his heart being still in Ireland and we were both strangers here. He felt, he said, 'like a fish out of water among all those Protestants', among which he included his own parishioners. Sometimes he came in through the kitchen door, sat on the sofa, gazing silently at the William Tell, or sitting at the piano and singing in a wonderfully nasal voice, 'I'll take you home again Kathleen'. He let his voice come out so without hindrance, without being shy about it, that I often had to close the windows. All of a sudden he would go mad about something which seemed to be troubling him and he said that he did not want to die in England, although he was perfectly healthy and had only been in England seven months.

I just stood and heard him sing this song over and over again and let him talk when he seemed angry, or made him

a cup of coffee. I tried to comfort him. I said that time passed over people, changing them, making them get used to their environment and that I had heard how the Irish were forever packing their suitcases to go home and then came back to England again. They were made like that. There was just no future in Ireland, the same as in Altbad. Not for the young. How wise I felt talking to this young priest who knew all about theology but, as yet, nothing much about life. At that he started to clown a little, telling me a few jokes I never saw the point of. He had a hallucinating, demented kind of humour. 'Very funny, Father,' I always said. It seemed an awful effort to call this young priest 'Father', since we did not do that in Altbad either, unless it was a monk, whom we called *Pater*. 'You need not say it all the time,' he said when I told him.

It gave me an interest to have this young man calling on me. It made me feel maternal. Strange to think that it was just by chance that you were born in a certain spot on earth, however ugly, and if you left it you sang homesick songs about it, yearned for it. Perhaps it was only the Swiss and the Irish and perhaps the Negroes who felt like that, for I had never known John yearn for the Midlands when he was away from them. But then even if he had he would not have shown it.

Soon, he burst into song again, a Gaelic song. It was a tuneless dirge of longing, almost Oriental. His mind and his whole soul were in Ireland still, which, according to him, was one of the few countries under the direct protection of the Virgin Mary. I did not think that She was so partisan, but did not say so.

As he was leaving, looking round the garden as usual, he saw hidden beneath a red-currant bush, some young anemones. His mother too, he said, had a meadow full of them bordering on one of the lakes, and this was the

flower Christ had in His mind when He spoke of the lilies of the field and how they did not toil or spin. That they grew in masses along Lake Genezareth, that their name both in Hebrew and Arabic was *Shusan* to this very day. He then leaped over the garden gate, jumped on his cycle and broncoed down the drive, waving good-bye with both hands.

I returned to the anemones feeling rather awed and very happy thinking that it was on them that the eyes of Jesus had looked and not on those other lilies, those tall stiff flowers with their oversweet scent which reminded me always of early death and mourning.

'And what's that young man doing here?' asked Mother as she came into the garden gate. 'Does he often call on you?'

'Oh yes, he came three times this week. He makes himself at home.'

'Believe me,' said Mother, blushing a little, 'if he were a gentleman, he would not call that often.'

'Oh Mother, please,' I said, 'he is only a boy and very lonely.'

'Lonely?' she cried, 'and he a priest?'

'Even a priest may be lonely. Perhaps more so,' I answered back rather crossly.

Mother was very angry indeed. She went to examine the apple trees in the back garden and told me, as though it were my fault, that they had American blight. I showed her the anemones and for a moment felt tempted to tell her about Christ and the lilies of the field, but was very glad I had not done so when she said, 'Remember, the Irish and the Welsh have one thing in common, you can't believe a word they say.'

## Chapter Twenty-five

ONE evening, John was to take me to see his grandfather. I had been warned by Mother that the old gentleman was difficult. He also was an autocrat. Perhaps it was this that had helped him to make the family's fortune. I had a strong desire to run away. There were women I had already met who were used to dining with the wealthy, made a practice of it and talked of dukes and duchesses as dear George and darling Winifred. Of course, as a Swiss, I had never been such. And I felt as unimportant as a dun-coloured hen driven from its midden by Rhode Island Reds. John laughed at me. His heart and stomach did not tremble at the sight of Aunt Ethel's down-turned mouth. He was used to her. Mother had also warned me not to play Chopin's nocturnes should the old man ask me to play. She knew now when I played, I played with feeling and emotion, which would not do for cold ears and dull propriety. Besides, the old man was not sentimental. This was not the age and place to express oneself too warmly and in too luxuriant a manner. I well knew that by now, and it cramped my style.

Everything looked tremendously impressive, the winter-garden brightly lit up, the fountain playing over the lily pond, men, uncles, standing about in evening clothes, the



women sitting around on numerous plushy seats, while the old gentleman rose and took my hand. He had a hard face it is true, but he was friendly enough. He had an air of great distinction, an old-world air, not unlike a Swiss farmer.

One of the uncles, wearing a drooping white moustache, came trotting in looking slightly flushed. He took off his glasses, polished them and said, 'Well, well, and how do you like England?' He beamed at me with bloodshot eyes. I felt that if we had been alone, he might have slapped my back or done something equally jolly like my Uncle Hypolite when he was slightly drunk.

The women talked about dressmakers, maids, the vicar and recipes. All their ancestors, according to Aunt Ada, who was tall and only an in-law, and wore no corsets (but was not pregnant, John said, adding 'too old') had lived hereabouts. I said it was like a Swiss village where everyone was related too. The town, she added, was strewn with members of the family and in innumerable cemeteries in outlying villages you could still find their names engraved on ancient gravestones. I said that I could show her a gravestone or two over two hundred years old with my ancestors' names on them. They were used as flooring now in my Aunt Lucy's pigsty. Suddenly the uncle with the white moustache rose and looked as if he were about to sing 'The British Grenadiers', raised his glass and said, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, The King.' Everybody rose and I wondered if the King would care one way or another. Immediately after drinking to royalty the men talked about the government and how rotten it was. This seemed odd to me, considering they had just toasted the sovereign. Besides, a Swiss, owing to having the referendum, was almost always pleased with his.

From the window at my side I could see the chauffeurs'

and gardeners' lodges. They were also turreted like the house itself. Turrets had always impressed me somehow, they seemed to be so useless. My Aunt Ida had turrets too, as well as loggias, neither of them were ever used. Only a stuffed owl was kept in the one overlooking the lake. I could see the old gentleman was looking at me now and then, making me feel as though we had something in common. I wished I would have dared to smile at him. The aunts were talking across me most of the time about their children and their ailments and John, with his hand in his pocket, was jingling some pennies, and a tall uncle, also an in-law, smiled at me across the room. He lifted an eyebrow as if saying, 'Don't be so impressed.'

Who would have thought that some day I would look back on my days in the convent as halcyon days, when there was always sunshine, and life was still mysterious and all horizons beckoning and unclouded by important women with voices like foghorns. Perhaps it was the wine I had sipped, but I got lost in daydreams about those days in the woods a few hundred miles away when we novices with chaste gravity gathered baskets of bilberries for bottling, flitting about like sprites between the pine trees, knowing that we were not quite like other people, having a different outlook on life to anyone outside, unaffected as we were by lack of position or by the lack of fortune. We had had no 'social' life! Oh for those carefree days when we rose with the lark and the summer seemed to have lasted since the world began. Even while scrubbing the cloister floors in the hours of silence one could indulge in the gentlest and most interesting melancholy.

John's father eyed me critically once or twice as he reclined deep in a chair, lighting a cigar. He was the languid type, a type one rarely meets abroad. He got to his office at ten o'clock and at eleven he went out for a cup of

coffee. After that, he got himself two library books and at twelve-thirty left for his lunch. He returned to the office at half past two to see that the others had pulled their weight, had a game or two of cards at his club until it was time to go home for dinner. He was, I expect, a 'man of property', the kind one often sees along the railway line as one emerges from a tunnel, rows of human dwellings festooned with washing, galvanized baths and dustbins.

The aunts rose and all the women trooped into the drawing-room and promptly sat down again. Mother came up to me, pulling the three little bows in front of my bodice straight, asking me once more not to play Chopin or Gounod or Rubinstein. Mother had a mania it seemed for not showing sentiment. I tried to open a conversation with the others. There was Aunt Clarice, who like the others was very small, her copious breasts and her royal hairstyle giving her much dignity. She told me that she had never been abroad and that Bournemouth was good enough for her.

So I wandered off into the winter-garden by myself. I had never seen the like before. The domed glass roof was sheltering tropical plants in a steamy atmosphere, plants the old gentleman had brought home from his travels through India, Japan, China, Africa and elsewhere. Orchids were sadly drowsing there, Madonna lilies breathing an odour of death. A white campanula seemed to be weeping from a basket strung up to the roof, wanting to reach down to mother earth. A solitary alien scarlet cactus bloom appeared to be telling me a story of exile, stirring me deeply. None of them had any part in the life of the other.

Suddenly the old gentleman, who was now over eighty, stood beside me asking how I liked his collection. He looked so friendly that I became quite chatty. I talked of the lime tree on the avenue which I climbed, my grandmama, the cumbra pine five hundred years old that stood near

her home, the scarlet pomegranate and the Mexican poppy flourishing in my aunt's garden, the creeping azaleas and bright red rhododendrons on the hills and the chamois living above in the cliffs, standing like statues at the very edge of a precipice, the heels of their hooves struck into the ground always ready to spring. He wanted to know what my family had thought when I married John. I said that at first they had discussed it for a long time, for they thought they should not let me go out of their world like that, but in the end, when they knew John better, they thought that I could do worse. After all, for generations everyone abroad had admired Englishmen.

He waved towards some cane chairs and we sat down. Within reach of my hand a strange savage-looking bloom was digesting flies. It was like being in a jungle. The old man asked me what I thought of his wonderful azaleas which looked as though they had been made in wax or fashioned in sugar by a Swiss pastry-cook and dyed faintly pink. I said that one could have too much of exotic blooms and that as a whole I preferred the flower-quilted mountainsides at home, the meadows filled with gentian and autumn crocus and the smell of ripe fruit, apples, plums, and new-made cider.

We talked of the mountains and I told him of the marmot in my uncle's field which barked so shrilly in the spring, the golden eagle which nested not far away, the red-footed falcon, the rock swallows on the cliffs of the Ebenalp, the water ouzel always hanging over the foaming streams and how one could devote one's whole life to watching them if one could so justify one's existence. The old gentleman wanted to know how it was that I knew of such things and I told him that we had been taught at school. We tramped for days with our schoolmaster and were told of the very beginnings of time. It was the kind of country

where it was easy to learn of nature. We often picked up precious stones on our walks, garnets, smaragdites and others.

'Well,' said the old gentleman, 'I've been a very lonely man and I've decided that it would be nice to grow something beautiful!' Inside the house were seven of his children, yet being British and most reticent, he had remained alone. I told him about my grandmama who had been equally alone and old. She had kept cows and goats and in winter, when the lakes were frozen over, she had tied old woollies round their bodies and their legs.

I suddenly fell silent. I felt that I had said too much. When, oh when, would I be able to master the art of keeping silent and not betray my simple origin. Then he told me quite gently that he too came of simple people who lived in the heart of the country, people who only owned a field and three Jersey cows, and now there was a coal mine there and everything was ruined. His father had been the local blacksmith.

I rose and we went into the garden. There it all was different. A thrush was singing in the dusk, bluebells looking modest in a spinney were closing their blooms for nightfall. Sweet-scented violets, hyssop and spearmint reminded me of those drowsy afternoons in the convent garden when it was so difficult to be young and dedicated to self-denial. Some of the aunts came to look for us, telling their father that he should beware of the night air considering his recent illness. He said, 'Don't fuss, I'm enjoying myself.'

Inside again, the old man, sitting by the table nodding to himself, his eyes wandering from face to face, filled my heart with pity. It was easy to see that his sons and daughters were in awe of him. He was said to be a hard man and to have cut one of his sons off with a shilling. Perhaps like so many fathers he was not formed for friendship with his children. Would it not be better, I wondered, if, after all,

some of the British were taught to communicate their thoughts and feelings?

John smiled at me across the room and beckoned. So I sat down at the piano and played a piece by Grieg, and a more soulless piece no one could have chosen. The old man thanked me very politely and soon we took our leave. 'I always did think,' I heard Aunt Ethel saying, 'that foreigners are far older than their years.' I asked John what she had meant by that and he said 'he was blowed if he knew'.

## Chapter Twenty-six

WHEN sitting on that seat in the lime tree, I felt as Rousseau must have done when alone on the island of St. Pierre on Lake Bienne, where he lost himself in devotional feelings, giving himself up to objectless fantasies. A kind of blessing fell from those branches. I did not let my presence be known to an old lady, the Coroner's wife, who staggered up the uneven path to my front door to leave three gilt-edged visiting cards. She did not knock, but withdrew hastily, forgetting to shut the gate. Leaving one's card was a thing of the past, Mother told me, and no wonder. It did not mean a thing. Still, it was nice of her and I knew now her name and how to spell it.

I went on musing on that tree, delighted with a melancholy that was both soft and interesting. It was lovely to be alone with one's soul. But not for long when you were young. One still lacked the philosophy necessary for calmer equanimity. Quite soon I was yearning for some company and above all to be loved and to be noticed.

I could hear Leslie's sports car passing up the road, making the kind of noise one associated with that kind of man. Then the postman, who usually brought the second delivery, handed me a letter. He always knew where to

find me. He was about the most ignorant postman I ever knew. I had a feeling that he did not know the difference between Switzerland and Sweden. And he also thought there was something naughty and easily approachable about all foreign women. He shoved his cap to the back of his head and winked. It seemed, from what he said, that the monotony of his life was relieved only once; that was when there was a war on and he was a soldier abroad. 'No wonder,' I said 'the British are forever fighting.'

The letter was from Josephine. She had found out where her father lived, having enlisted the Salvation Army's help. And it was not far from here, barely seventy miles. She had met Mama upon her return and in spite of what she had told her of the English sky, which, she had said, was mostly grey like the skin of a mule and only occasionally as grey as a dove and almost never as blue as a forget-me-not, she was dying to come to England.

When Josephine arrived on Friday morning, we were lucky. We saw the fire-brigade turn out which, for some reason I was now trying to analyse, made me almost burst with pride. They looked so smart. Then we saw a judge wearing his wig, riding in a large black car to the law courts, followed by outriders on horseback. I felt suddenly immensely proud of the town. Did this mean that like Mother I would after all belong? You could not deny that the city had dignity, scarred though it was with commerce. Josephine said she rather liked its ugliness, one could have too much scenery, get used to it in fact. Ugliness had its fascination, it was soothing. This shocked me a little, coming from her, but it also pleased me. With such a spirit as hers, one might, I thought, one day become Mayoress. The taxi-driver stopped the car outside the Town Hall so that we might admire its beauty. It was new and stood out



whitely among the other buildings. One could not help hoping that soon it would get dirty too.

We drew up on the avenue by the lime tree and the broken gate. I was sure Josephine would be impelled to stop and make some rude remarks about the house, or pay homage to my lovely tree. But she did not seem to notice either. She took it all for granted. I felt sure it was that English blood in her. By the door she turned, looked townwards and laughed a little as though she was happy to have come home at last. She widened her nostrils as if drawing in sweet oxygen. And I knew that there was no holding her back from the journey north, of which she had dreamed for a long time now.

It was a very odd trip to this strange town up in the north. It was the unknown there that awaited us which was exciting. Besides, she too, like so many girls in villages, had wanted 'to get away from it all'. Wide-eyed, like babes in the wood, we stared at everything.

'Jesus,' sighed Josephine once or twice as she stared from the carriage window, seeing these colourful cows lying in the grass beneath soft hills, with dreamy, ancient churches tucked away behind old, old trees. It was the sort of landscape you could not describe. You could have painted it in water-colour and it would not have found a buyer, not in Altbad. It was not paradisaical. It was simple, serious and melancholy, like a Celtic song, all mist and meadows. You could think yourself walking those gentle hills in the wind, but we could not imagine what the people living there in those cottages would be like, some bard, perhaps, or a soldier back from some war.

Wending its way cross-country, the train spun out its seventy-mile journey to four hours, with two changes, and as it pulled up at noon, we arrived in a town almost identical

to the one we had left behind. We tramped down the main street and what we noticed were identical school-girls with green blazers standing about street corners as in other towns, and identical old men sitting quietly round a war memorial, not arguing like those sitting outside the Altersheim at home. There was a sort of *dolce far niente* on an early afternoon in an English town, reminiscent of the sun-drenched *ennui* of far away Italy. Passing a church, Josephine, who was very quiet, said, 'Let's go in.' As luck would have it, and we hoped it was a good omen, there was a statue inside of St. Joseph shepherding a very thin sheep. He was, of course, Josephine's patron saint.

As we walked along again, we talked of other days, for we really did not want to talk of our quest, which to me seemed no longer dramatic, but merely silly. After all, one could not get to know a man, or properly make his acquaintance, in one short afternoon. The world was still very young for us, coming, as we did, from the alps. We were only twenty-two. Strange gossamer stuff veiled as yet much reality. All the way up to the hospital district where, according to the investigations of the Salvation Army, this Dr. Green lived, who had studied medicine in such and such a year in London, Josephine talked of love. To neither of us it appeared to be much of a physical thing, but something out of this world, lasting a lifetime. It was something that came from above like light, which renewed itself all along through the years. Thus, Josephine felt sure, this man must have felt for her mother in those bygone days. Nobody knew, she said, if he had not returned again and again looking for her in vain. I did not altogether believe that. Not for nothing had I, when at the convent, heard so much about an awfully deceitful world, for which we had prayed day after day and night after night.

At last, after many inquiries, we came up to Number Twenty-five Park Avenue. For some reason we did not know, we began to talk in whispers, discussing whether we should ring the bell of this red brick house, which stood beside a giant hospital, or if we should just hang about for a while waiting for someone to come out. I remembered John, who had not been very keen on this strange outing. Manlike, he thought that after all that time one should leave well alone.

As Josephine pressed the bell, I shivered in my very soul and trembled in my belly. This was it. It took an uncommonly long time for someone to come to the door. And when at last we heard footsteps in the hall, staccato high-heeled steps, a few beads of sweat broke out on Josephine's forehead. The woman coming to the door was just about to leave the house dressed very elegantly, wearing a white hat with a spotted veil. On her left wrist she wore three golden bracelets drawn over her glove and on her right arm she carried a white Pekinese, which snarled at us and showed his little teeth. If this was Dr. Green's wife, she was the very opposite to Martha, a pale little light-weight against a rosy twelve stone. She must have felt that to us she was an object of great interest and admiration, even though she wore a great deal of make-up which, to people coming from Altbad, was the nearest thing to sin. She frowned. No, the doctor was not in. He was over there at the hospital attending to out-patients. If we were in a hurry, we should find him there.

We continued our way in silence. Finally, by the hospital gates, I said, 'I think we should call the whole thing off.' The idea that this complete stranger we were seeking might be quite impossible to approach, began to worry us. So far Josephine's personal day-dream had been of a tall kindly father, full of many interests, who might possibly hold his

hand out to her. Alas, a good part of her life had been lived in the future.

Presently, we found ourselves in a stone-flagged hall, the size of a Swiss railway station. In the subdued light shining through a domed glass roof, we could see groups of people sitting in their allotted corners outside several surgery doors. It reminded me of the vast porch of the Convent of the Sacred Heart where tramps and other passers-by sat waiting patiently to be given a plate of soup. Only here there were no statues and no crucifix. Perhaps a crucifix would not have been appropriate in a place like this. White-clad sisters and young doctors flitted about, in and out of doors, looking shockingly sophisticated among those silent people. Outside a door, where printed on a piece of cardboard it said Mr. A. R. Green, we sat down. Why Mister? I wondered. Perhaps he was not a doctor after all. Josephine removed her hat. Her shining fair hair combed back, her printed cotton dress, her slender shapely form, made her a winning creature and should fill any man's heart with pride. She was restless though. Her nervousness took stronger and stronger hold upon her, she started looking at her wrist-watch every few minutes or so.

Occasionally the door opened and quickly shut again as patients went in and out. Then for a while it remained ajar and we could see a stocky man with slightly greying hair, very quietly dressed in a dark grey suit, wearing a blue-black striped tie, holding up an X-ray photograph to the light. Oh dear, I thought, can he ever have been young! He looked so much older than Martha. While Josephine kept watching that door, her hands tightly clasped in her lap, I imagined seeing Martha's chaste face behind those patched curtains of the Convent of the Holy Cross, bent over the handle of an ancient sewing machine,

confined in her whitewashed cell, sitting on a broken chair without a back.

More and more people arrived to take their places at our side. Then Josephine rose and said, 'Let's get out of here.' So we went loitering up to an old, partially ruined castle nearby, which was surrounded with large public grounds. A military band was playing there, a march by Sousa, the same as the *Blechmusik* played every Sunday afternoon in the Kurhaus garden. The tune was jubilant and played with astonishing exactness considering it was an English band. After all, we had always been told that the British were not musical. Feeling pleasantly stirred by the music which came to us in waves as the wind roared and blew smoke about, we climbed the steps into the picture gallery. How rich with history England was! Scenes of gruesome battles hung upon the walls and portraits of dead men bearing noble names as well as ordinary people wearing chains of office, fat men, thin men, virtuous faces, greedy faces and faces conveying absolutely nothing, not being true to anything. There was also a dazzling goddess stepping out of the sea. She was naked. By habit, cultivated at the convent, I still pretended to be unaware of the human body when completely nude, and when later I was told that this was a famous painting I was sorry I had not dared to look a little longer.

It was four o'clock. Dr. Green was still in his office which was very handsomely furnished. His desk was very large like a business executive's, and his chair swivelled this way and that as he talked to a sister who, anyone could see, was a mass of self-assurance. She came up to us asking for our cards. When we said we had no cards and were merely waiting for somebody, she wanted to know if we happened to be the blood donors she was expecting. We were getting very hungry and argued a little, nearly quarrelling about the

stupidity of having come just to look at this elderly man who would have forgotten his youth long ago. Dark clouds were gathering above the glass roof and someone turned on the lights which lit up, high upon the walls, some large framed posters of the south of France and the deep blue skies and flaming colours of Madeira.

Then, like a breath of fresh air, a dozen or so blood donors arrived, girls who looked like gym-mistresses, a navvy or two, while someone put up some stretcher beds for them to lie on. The surgeries were closing down and if, when we reached the porch, there had not been a sudden flash of thunder and a terrific cloud-burst, we would never have met Mr. Green. As it was, he suddenly stood beside us, a bowler hat in his hand. Hailstones covered the pavements and lightning slit the sky beyond the castle. 'A wonderful sight, is it not?' he said, looking at us two. Then he looked at Josephine as if he tried to place her, noting without a doubt that we were two foreigners in cotton frocks, two innocents abroad. I did not want to let him slip through our fingers so I said that where we came from we were always terrified of thunderstorms, and he asked us where that was. When I said Altbad in Switzerland, he smiled and said that he knew it. He used to go ski-ing there when he was young. I could tell that he made a very favourable impression on Josephine but she seemed too shy to speak. Besides, her English was not very good. She had learnt it in ten easy lessons from a Capucin monk. Then the doorman came up to talk to him and when he had gone the doctor turned to us and said, 'What has brought you here to this town of all places?' Josephine said she had always wanted to look at England and that if he was Dr. Green, she had come across his name in her grandfather's visiting book at the Gention Inn. Just then, the doorman brought up a large umbrella and gave it to the doctor who looked at

his watch and then across the street, and pointing to a café he said would we care to have a cup of tea with him. It was not a nice café. A pyramid of dummy cigarette cartons, lacquered hams and very yellow scones filled the window on which someone had written with chalk 'Cooked meats'.

'So you come from Altbad,' said Dr. Green, and as he said it the whole village seemed to rise up in our thoughts with its haunted, laughing streams and stones and scintillating sky. I looked at him sideways now and then, but could not tell what he was thinking. It did not seem to have struck him that it might not have been pure coincidence that we were there. But somehow he must have sensed that we were taking in every detail of his appearance, his immaculate suit and his strong hands resting on the table. I told him that Josephine sprung from the Gentian Inn and her name was Haas, and that I was married to an Englishman who also used to go ski-ing there. He said that he remembered quite well staying in Altbad even though he had never been able to return. Looking at his watch, he asked what had happened to the landlord and his daughter. Josephine blushed. 'You mean Martha?' she asked. You could tell that 'Martha' was but a name to him. It might as well have been Rosy or Marie. 'Martha,' said Josephine, 'is my mother. She has gone into a nunnery.'

'A nunnery?' he said, 'How time passes. I can remember her wearing one of those national costumes, all ribbons and laces and silk pinafores.'

Outside, people went by, their umbrellas open. The pavements looked greasy with wet. Josephine said she was looking for a job in England and then, a little shyly, she brought out that photograph she had found at the back of her mother's drawer. It was signed A. R. Green. She seemed to hesitate, smiled at him, and when she smiled she looked

truly lovely showing a dimple on either side of her mouth, handed him the faded snapshot saying she had found it among her mother's belongings.

I had the impression as Mr. Green straightened his back, examining the photograph, that it had dawned on him that there might be a possible connexion between this girl, who had evidently sought him out, and himself. His eyes seemed to look deeper, his features sharper. But when he looked up eventually, there was quite a teasing, merry look in his eyes and handing back the snapshot, he said, 'Was this really me, d'you think?' Josephine smiled. You could tell that she had taken a liking to him. The episode was over. She had met her father and would no doubt never see him again. 'Well, it has been very nice to meet someone from Altbad,' said Dr. Green, looking at his watch, adding that he had some private patients waiting for him at home. He opened the door for us asking should be ring for a taxi since it was drizzling still. From the steps of his home, which was almost next door, he turned and raised his hat and Josephine called 'Good-bye,' her voice ringing out, echoing between the high walls of the hospital and an eye infirmary.

Looking around me as we walked along, I imagined that to be obliged to live with such ugliness as there was here in this neighbourhood must have its compensations. Poets had sprung from such places far more often than from pastoral and mountain scenes. I wanted to say so to Josephine, but she was not noticing. In spite of all the paintings in the attic room where she had grown up she had not been much influenced by colour or the lack of it. Besides, she did not want to talk. Now and then I halted to look into a shop window while she stood patiently at my side, not noticing the pawnbroker's shop either, such a novelty for a Swiss; or the Estate Agent advertising little houses as



ugly as sin for a down-payment of only five pounds; or the lobelias lying flat in the seepage of water in a public garden. I also thought of the lovely pink Venus at the gallery I had not dared to look at properly. Whatever the English summer outside, she stood there in the sunlight on the shore of the sea for ever. My mind went back over the whole of the afternoon and found the experience very thin.

For over an hour, we sat without speaking in the station restaurant, staring at the littered floor, the messy tables, the silent people. Behind the buffet I caught a glimpse of myself and realized that Mother's hairdresser had played havoc with my hair because it was too fine for perming and stood out wildly from my forehead. I also thought of the things that went on in Altbad now, on this very day. The Feast of the Guardian Angels, the *Seenachtfest* on Lake Constance, the crowds, the dancing in the streets. The trout would be rising now in the Sitter. I looked at Josephine admiring the air of patience she wore. Perhaps she felt at peace now having no ties left, having walked in and out of her father's life in one short afternoon.

The most woebegone little locomotive I had ever seen kept on shunting in a cloud of yellow smoke, and a train carrying coal came out, apparently, of the underworld. I was getting tired of waiting and waiting and practising English patience, which as far as I could see, never led to anything much either.

'What now?' I said at last.

'Well,' she said quite casually, 'I came a stranger and I go again a stranger.' She wished she had not shown him the snapshot though. But on the whole, she was glad she had seen him. He looked a kindly man. She did not care for the wife though, and would not have wanted to come between them even if he had acknowledged her.

'D'you think he guessed?' I asked.

'Oh yes, he knew,' said Josephine. 'I could see his mind straying back to the little inn and the "people in it".'

'He gave you a chance though to meet him again should you want a nurse's job.'

'I know. It was all he could do.'

For a little while, we both seemed to think of Martha again, tucked away in the dim, dark little convent, atoning. It was there and then, looking up to the domed glass roof of the railway station, hearing the rain beating down on it, that Josephine decided that after all she had seen what she wanted, a serious man who was her father, rather stern and quiet, an English gentleman, and that this was enough for her. I could not see what she could get out of that myself. After all, he seemed to have looked upon Martha as a pick-up, which had been very wrong of him.

We nearly squabbled during the hours we sat in that dismal train, travelling between warehouses and oily canals. I did not think one should be so grateful to be the daughter of a good man who had not even known that one existed. She did not want to hear my arguments. But then she was like that, used to taking knocks and quite ready to lead a hard and self-reliant life. She was off to London in the morning to find a job at one of its famous hospitals. Who knows, perhaps I envied her a little too. She had no mother-in-law to tell her what to do, and no Aunt Ethel either.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

I WAS very sorry to part from Josephine. Some part of me seemed to go with her. John, who sat at my side, was whittling away on a wooden figurine, as he had been taught by the gamekeeper in Altbad. Everything John did was always of symmetry and beauty. Mother was having a garden party in the afternoon and the little figurine was to be auctioned there. We neither of us said anything. I could see in my mind the years ahead. What would life have to offer, I asked myself, unless we had children?

I played a little Chopin, but I well knew John was not really listening. He did not know the difference between one composer and another. And yet John was good for me. But was I good for him? I stopped playing and began to read to him.

‘No, no! go not to Lethe, neither twist  
Wolf’s-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss’d  
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;  
Make not your rosary of yew-berries . . .’

John put down his tools, put his hand under my chin,

making me look up at him, saying, 'Darling, is it as bad as that?' I could not speak. I could feel tears in my eyes. 'Come on, get yourself ready,' he said, 'and we'll go for a walk.' We walked. Was this the reason, I wondered, why the English called it 'walking out' when young couples were hoping to grow closer to each other?

Not far from Mother's house stately homes stood far back from the tree-lined street. Many were up for sale. It was a sign of change, loss of business, factories closing down, sons leaving home, loss of security. To a Swiss this seemed the height of tragedy. Such beautiful homes. Homes like castles.

Mother's garden was a pleasing setting, tea spread out under the oak trees and stalls set out by the rosebeds. They were surrounded by pretty girls in floral dresses. One tall girl, one of the daughters of Mrs. Hemmingway, came up to me and, exposing an inch of red gum as she smiled, said she thought John was a 'scream' to have dared to marry a foreigner, and what *she* always said was, 'Good for him'. I never knew what to say at such moments, not until afterwards when it was too late.

Mother seemed immensely cheerful and made a great deal of fuss of a stately girl called Mary, who lived next door. She was in Girl Guide uniform. I knew that this girl had always been Mother's favourite, and that John had taken her out once or twice in the past. She looked beautiful and was as tall as John. Suddenly I wanted to go home. To Switzerland. To my papa, my aunts and uncles, where I would never be overlooked any more and insecure and foreign. Where it mattered little what I wore, where I would be welcome always. How, I wondered, had I ever dared to come here.

John was talking to Mary, he smiled and I wondered how he could have possibly preferred to marry me! I felt sure

that she would be awfully good at the things John did, walking miles, sitting at the back of his tandem, pushing hard, entertaining the aunts, full of self-assurance. When Mother saw me she introduced me to other young women who gathered in a circle, talking about each other's dresses. I took in their relaxed manner, their fair and golden good looks, noting my own hands and arms which were deeply browned, which made me feel dark and very dull. To think that I had once dreamed of having a salon, here, where everyone seemed to be more at ease and gayer than I.

When Mother found me alone in the spinney where, to my intense happiness, I heard two old ladies talk about John, remarking what a pretty girl he had married, she said she wanted me to come inside for a minute. The duchess would be here any minute now and she would like to alter my hair style quickly before she appeared. Up in her bedroom Mother combed my hair upwards away from my face, while I once more scanned her ancestors hanging on the walls. How solemn they looked. Like myself as I caught my reflection in the looking-glass. Suddenly I felt I had been timorous long enough. I said I did not like my hair style changed and I did not want to meet the duchess, that I had met duchesses before, German ones who had come to Switzerland, to live humbly there in small villas, that they had been very ordinary people, just like anybody else, very dowdy too and had only been different from other people in that they had kept lots of dogs. Mother laughed her high-pitched laugh, but was not really amused. I must not yield to her now, I said to myself. A wall was growing between us and we could do nothing about it. I was sure we both hated it. I wished, oh how I wished, we would understand each other better.

Mother went back into the garden and I wandered from room to room. The bookcase in the breakfast-room was

locked. The drawing-room had been redecorated for the occasion. Mother's voice, greeting people, could be heard through the open window. She was always a little gushing with strangers. It was an art. Small talk, any amount of it, was an art as well. I had never been brought up to it either. 'Idle talk', they had called it at the convent. All those hours of silence at Sacred Heart had not been the kind of training one needed at a social gathering like this. Perhaps, as I came to think of it, I had always been a little isolated, with Mama writing for the weekly *sonntagsblatt*, playing the harp, painting pictures and visiting the cemetery, and Papa with his orchestra. Good heavens, I asked myself, was I a woman with a problem?

Outside, the girl called Mary smiled dazzlingly at everybody in sight, especially at John who was helping the curate at a skittle game. How I would have loved to join in their banter. Mary's hair was like spun gold. She wore lipstick too, skilfully applied. If I had not been told by the novice mistress at the convent, who was training me to become a nun, that self-pity was a shameful thing, I could have sobbed just then for the little innocent I was.

At that moment, the duchess arrived and was surrounded at once. She seemed to be covered in rose-coloured light. She smiled a little, but very soon she looked distraite and almost absently allowed her cool hand to be shaken. Something, I could not understand it myself, made it quite impossible for me to go up to be introduced. I knew if I looked cheerful at all times and did not let it annoy me if Mother did things to my hair and my clothes, I too could make friends anywhere. Cheerfulness, I was told at the convent, was a politeness and should be cultivated. Oh dear, I was but a simple *bourgeois* who could shine only where I felt at home. I would have to be master of myself. When Mother led the duchess into the house, I fled out at the back.

Walking home, leaving John to help his mother, I made up my mind to leave England in the morning. I began to pack.

When I finished packing, I felt I had to tell someone. I rang up Betty. She seemed to be my best friend here.

'Listen Betty,' I said, 'I know you'll understand. I'm going home in the morning. I'm just sick with longing for my valley. It's not a case of going home to Mama. You know, she is not the kind of mother one goes home to. Perhaps it's the mountains calling. I don't know.'

Betty did not answer straight away. She seemed to be thinking. 'Now listen to me,' she said, 'there's a shortage of nice men all over the world. Husbands like your John are hard to find. Why, I mean to say, one has to grow up one day.'

'But I'm not going for good you know. I hope you don't think me mad to go, but somehow I know I simply must.'

Betty said that she knew well enough that everybody was a little mad at times. She too had insanity in the family. She had an aunt who was completely whacky, the one who was forever packing her bags and running away from this and that and had to be searched for by the police and brought back again! Betty, I thought sadly, did not seem to understand.

I had just hung up the phone when John came back to see what had happened to me and why I had disappeared. I said that I had packed by bags and was going home in the morning. For a little while, he just stood there lighting his pipe, saying nothing. He did not ask me why. The thing about a man, I thought, was that he has not much idea of what might upset a woman, and rarely noticed anything wrong unless it was pointed out to him. 'I can't blame you,' he said eventually, 'I only wish to goodness I could come with you.'

Later, sitting by the fire, I asked him what the meaning was of the word 'whacky', that I could not find it in the dictionary.

'Well,' he said, slowly humming and hawing a bit, 'it's a word like "gaga". It means slightly insane. Purely slang.'



## Chapter Twenty-eight

As the little electric train trudged slowly up the hill towards our village, I stood by the window searching the streets for anyone I might know. I thought longingly of the jug of hot coffee that would be on the table now. I was myself again. I was at home. Altbad. Breathing deeply, I smiled almost ecstatically to myself.

The young conductor, who was new, had called me 'Miss'. Perhaps it was my tweedy clothes, or the rouge on my lips, or the powder on my face that had given him the idea I was English. For some reason I could not have analysed, I felt immensely flattered. The stationmaster had not noticed me, nor had the postman. The porter of the Kurhaus offered to carry my bag, thinking me a foreign tourist.

Pride made me walk very upright through the village with a smile. After all, it was unusual, to say the least, to come home again so soon, alone. I pretended I did not see the young men who were gazing at me hard as they were returning from the rifle range. Nor did I want to see the women beating carpets at their fences, this being Saturday. Goodness, how everybody worked and enjoyed it. The church bells were ringing in the Sabbath as they had always done

at half past four. Life, it seemed, had gone on just the same without me. No one appeared to have noticed me except the blacksmith who shouted from his bicycle, 'What, back again on the old midden?' A farmer leading three pigs down the road swore '*Herrgottsternechaib*,' in good old *Schwyzerdütsch*. It was like heavenly music to me.

Inside the house everyone was busy too. Papa was playing Beethoven's C minor sonata with his friend the schoolmaster. Mama was not in the least surprised to see me. Since she was psychic, she had known I was on my way home. She rose from her chair where she had been sitting at her typewriter typing a poem for the forthcoming national day on the first of August in commemoration of the founding of the Swiss Confederation. She closely examined me, my face, my English clothes. She tried on my hat, which had been such an ordeal to buy in the presence of Mother, who had put hat after hat on my head, pulling them this way and that way, ruffling my hair. The memory still filled me with resentment. 'Good taste,' said Mama, 'is about all you can say for it.'

While Mama fetched the coffee, I went over to the typewriter and looked at her poem. It was to adorn the front page of our local weekly paper and was tremendously patriotic. Like all such poems, it was a mass of platitudes. Mama insisted on reading it to me, declaiming it dramatically. It was rather long, a true epic about the old confederates and the country's everlasting wise neutrality, which had given it endless peace. 'And prosperity,' I said, but Mama did not seem to hear.

It was but an hour after my arrival, after having greeted Papa, who had wiped a tear from his eyes, that I had to go with Mama to put flowers on my celestial brother's grave. Standing there, sprinkling it with holy water, we were both remembering. Different things though. I

remembered John, our wedding and how I had wanted to get out from behind the mountains into the big wide world! Grasshoppers leapt about from grave to grave and white butterflies hovered above the holy water stoup. Other people came along, for the Swiss love cemeteries and often made such visits their weekly outings. The dead never went from them, which was rather nice for the departed. They called them '*seelig*', my *seelig* mother or my *seelig* child, which means blessed and with God.

Mama had to explain right and left why I had returned home 'only for a few days', while I tried hard to look sophisticated. One of the women said, 'Jesus, you do look different.' Curious glances followed me up the street where some of my school friends, who had, it seemed, half-heartedly married local boys, had parked their perambulators outside their homes. Like the crickets in the grass, they had settled. It was only I who had not yet found a proper home.

In the evening up in my old room in the pink evening light streaming through the muslin curtains, I longed for John. A little angel had just fastened the evening star on to the sky and thousands of glow-worms flitted through the air. There seemed after all nothing more at home either for me to give my life to. Like so many exiles, I had to return once more to find that out. I thought of John, alone hundreds of miles away in that big strange city, and how I had disliked The Pines, that tight-laced spinster of a house, the hard beds, the awful greedy boiler with its false promises, the dismal rooms and furniture. Could I not accept things as they were for the sake of John, so good, so straight, so clean, and above all, so loyal and true? Downstairs, Papa was now playing Bach. The music went on and on murmuring about something so simple, so quiet, so disciplined, telling a tale about acceptance of life. Or did I but imagine it?

The following afternoon, Uncle Joe and two of my aunts, sensing some little scandal perhaps, came to see why I had come home. Uncle Joe, who wore his pince-nez as crookedly as ever, frankly thought I was quite mad. No sensible woman left a new husband, any husband for that. He did not think much of women anyway except 'in their proper sphere, serving their men'. A woman to be beloved and to be paid much attention to, in his opinion, must be very young and unattainable. As for a married woman, well, no one thought of such as a subject for poetry. She should stay at home and be grateful.

Like Papa, Uncle Joe belonged to the government administrative class, but unlike Papa, he looked it. He had a wonderful opinion of himself. His wife, Aunt Marie, who had auburn hair and thought this an affliction, had pomaded it to make it look dark, always nodded her head in humble agreement with anything he said. Mama, who thought her a silly sort of hen, smiled quietly to herself.

Uncle Joe wanted to know what good it had been to give the women the vote in England. He was convinced that when women asserted themselves too much, men became effeminate and the country decayed. Homes were neglected and children grew up without an aim in life. This started me off. I could not stop talking about John's country and the freedom of the women there. Freedom in money matters, how my friends there had their own accounts at the bank, and made their own decisions. I did not tell them, though, I had been wool-gathering for days, feeling the effect of the climate and the sunless sky, sitting in my bedroom because it was the only room with a bit of a view, dreaming of Altbad when not counting the rosebuds between the pink stripes on the wallpaper, thirty-five rosebuds between each of the forty-five stripes at the side of my bed. I did not tell them either, that Altbad seemed so much smaller

now than it was before, so much more locked away from the world. I found myself talking about 'We' when I told them about English ways. Never, I thought, had the English been so thoroughly described!

'I daresay,' said Aunt Marie dryly, 'in spite of having the vote, it is the same for English women as it is for us. One long journey from the kitchen to the bier.'

'Don't talk rubbish,' said Uncle Joe sternly and left the room.

Sunday was truly Sunday in Altbad. The bells were ringing madly as if for a Pontificate. After Mass, everyone walked about in the cemetery where their ancestors lay, admiring the flowers made of beads strung on wire, their favourite lobelias, or the waxen blooms sealed from the weather under a glass dome. It was eighty-six degrees in the shade and the men wandered to the *Wirtschaft* to have a drink in the shady garden, while the women bought themselves some cream-filled cakes at the baker's, who did his brisker trade on Sundays. In the afternoon, even though it was a day of rest, everyone turned out to gather in the hay, for there was thunder in the air and hay was more important than to keep the Sabbath holy.

I sat in the little garden by the arum lilies and thought about the sermon, 'Although our bodies be presently here on earth, nevertheless, our living is in Heaven!' The young Capucin monk had gone on to say that the soul was there 'where it loveth'. Where, I wondered, was my soul? Surely at the moment it was with John. And yet when I was with him, it was here within the mountains. Or was it in Heaven all the time as the nuns had said at the Convent of the Sacred Heart. If so, it was no use at all to run away from one place to another. But why bother about the soul on a lovely day like this.

The house grew full of people towards the late afternoon, all dressed in formal Sunday clothes. They came from down the Lake of Constance, that glorious lake, so vast, so sophisticated on the German side, so unspoilt on ours, that lake on which an English admiral had once fought against the soldiers of Napoleon, who had constantly used guerrilla tactics against the Swiss and nipped across the lake to pinch the brass and copper pans from my ancestors. His name was Williams.

Aunt Lucy, the healer, who came to greet me stared at me as if I were a ghost. 'You would not be unhappy?' she said.

'Oh no,' I cried, but you could see she had her doubts.

'Ah, you can't hide a heart that's scalded from me.'

I assured her that my heart was not scalded and that I had brought some presents for them all. It had been extraordinarily difficult to buy anything typically British, a few yards of corduroy, 'Manchester' as the Swiss called it, and a few yards of English tweed which everyone handled, fraying the edges, to admire the woven yarn. Uncle Hypolite, who was running to fat and looked rather bald and overfed, which I had not noticed before, showed no interest in foreign countries. Drink and food was what he liked best.

The owner of the Kurhaus joined the party. He too had been in England once. He had delighted in those days of his youth. Quite frankly he said that living in Altbad was no life at all. He had had a room in London in Charlotte Street. Did I know it? It gave him untold pleasure to meet anyone from there! He felt sure that I understood his feelings.

Mama brought out the wine into the garden. The trout stream below the fence leaped merrily down to the flour-mill, ceaselessly sweeping this way and that. There was more to be said for Altbad than for Charlotte Street.

On Monday, I had a letter from John, telling me that

he missed me very much. Nothing was the same without me. He had been for a long ride in the country on his bicycle. It had been raining hard. But he had enjoyed it. It was a simple letter, the kind Englishmen evidently write, not liking to express themselves in too luxurious a manner. How likeable John was. And how amazing. He had gone out into the rain and ridden through those long and oily streets for pleasure.

There was also a letter from Mother. She wrote on very thick paper with purple ink, a strange shade which had a hint of the clerical. Her letters were upright and very bold.

My very dear daughter.

I hope that you will soon feel strong again. John misses you very much and hopes, like we all do, that you will be more settled when you return. I dearly hope too that in the future you'll feel more at home at The Pines, and wish you could see how snug I have made it with new chintzes, pink carnations on a fawn ground, at three-and-eleven a yard. I am not well, as you may see by my handwriting, so I will say good-bye to you and may God bless you. Your loving Mother.

Did, I asked myself over and over again, Mother really love me? Or even like me? Could I now return to England and leave the alien that was in me behind me. Forever? They had tried to teach me at the convent to take up any burden cheerfully and to subordinate my happiness to that of others. All that was so much easier in a convent than among the worldly minded to whom I too belonged. I suddenly yearned to return to Sacred Heart. I had often secretly longed to go back there, for if one could not lead a fuller life than I led in the North, one should be able to live like an angel, in the communion with saints. How Betty

would laugh if she knew my thoughts. How embarrassed Mother would be.

On the following morning, much to Mama's disgust, I went back along that dusty road once more to where the convent lay. I wanted to cast another look on the place where I had spent two long years and hoped, that by doing so, I would have done with backward yearnings. All along the road were little alcoves placed beneath some trees, small retreats with a bench in front inviting one to rest. Inside these alcoves, behind some grids, were the most colourful shrines inside which coins and cheap jewellery had been thrown by passers-by. Some artificial pearls hung round Our Lady's neck, and other divine women peeping from other niches, with bewitching softness and simplicity and lack of sophistication, had their jewellery too. It struck me that we had no images in Switzerland of mighty ones. Only Helvetia had survived and the Madonna, the universal Mothers.

By the wrought-iron gates I stopped. Once more I heard the pigeons cooing. It was a lovely place to come to out of an industrial city. I had forgotten that here there was no freedom either. Always there had to be obedience to some rule or another. But it was much easier, and often quite pleasant, if it was asked of all alike.

Slowly I went down the shady drive. Roses and forget-me-nots grew on either side of the gravel path. Under one of the chestnut trees sundry sisters were busy preparing vegetables, the plump little Italian, Sister Bonaventura, the delicate English sister, Bernadette, and Sister Ursula, tall and flashy-eyed, revealing depths of feeling wonderfully controlled. I did not want to be seen. Unnoticed, I went down to the gardener's entrance by the stable door. It was astonishing how anyone could walk about those



corridors without meeting a soul. On tiptoe I passed the bakehouse, up the sanded passage to the cloisters. It was uncanny. Most sisters were down at the school, others were at prayers and in the kitchens. I felt as if I had never left and my life with John and my short stay in England had only been a dream. My presence must have still haunted the place and may haunt it for ever. Gently I opened the door to the private chapel and saw two nuns at their perpetual prayers, forever pleading for the world and for peace on earth, I felt that they might just as well have been praying to the stars. Here I had often thought of John, not without feeling carnal and guilty, and the big wide world that would open for me if I left the convent walls. How I had wanted the world!

Walking through the cemetery to the church, I wondered for a fleeting moment if I had had a vocation after all and had rejected it too hastily. The convent's dog, Barry, lay in the porch, rose and wagged his tail excitedly. He knew me at once. I had often prepared his food for him. The river flowing by was as deep blue as a summer sky. The sound of its rushing in the spring when the snow was melting in the mountains had filled the cloisters and the close. How it had enticed me! How it had borne such promise. And now I had the world, I was not sure if I liked it. I had John it is true, but there was something more I wanted and I did not know what it was. I had him to love and to be anxious over and, who knows, that might be better after all than to be anxious only for myself. Perhaps what I wanted most was a child and to live quietly and peacefully with my husband, the same as other women did with theirs. Carnal it is true.

Then I met Sister Phylomena. She was very old, hobbling along on crutches. 'Whatever are you wearing those things for!' she said, pointing to my clothes. She had forgotten

that I had left and was married now. Then she swept her hand across her brow and remembered. She asked me to follow her and took me along to the private chapel to kneel down beside her in the hindermost pew. I had knelt there many times before at all hours of the day and night, but this time I decided to be less humble and as demanding as anyone could be and boldly asked for a miracle to happen to me, the same as had happened many times to others. I did not know what kind of miracle I wanted, but imagined God would know. It was difficult to believe though that God would favour me here among all those holy people, I, so worldly now and lacking in charity.

Sister Phylomena insisted that I should go and see the Mother Superior. I did not really want to go. But first I must have a meal, she demanded. She would not listen to me when I told her I had wanted to return to solitude only for an hour or so and did not wish to meet a soul. Well, Sister Pelagia, the 'hostess' of the week, very tall, very ecclesiastic, a little distant, came up bowing as if I were of some importance. I was a guest now and that was enough. She brought forth several small delicacies from the kitchen which I did not in the least deserve and, as I well knew, were only prepared for visitors. There was even a glass of wine. I ate alone while she and Sister Phylomena sat at either side of me wanting me to tell them all about England. That I could not do without saying more than I wanted to. Were there any good confessors? Was it true that the English were a highly religious people? Oh dear, I could not tell them that the only priest I knew was the young Irishman who was as lonely as I and not really any help to me. Sister Pelagia rose and we prayed and then she bowed reverentially and saw me to the door.

So down I went once more along the endless corridors and knocked at the office door. Mother Superior was

rather severe and the thought of meeting her again made me shiver in my soul. Now Mother Superior believed utterly in the ennobling effect of absolute celibacy on the human character, the spirit and the purity of a person's soul. She nodded as I entered but finished her letter first. And as she rose to greet me her tight lips parted a fraction and she smiled. She was coldly polite and said that she was glad I had come and would be glad for me to stay the night if I wanted to.

'And how do you find the world in England?' she asked.

'The same, I expect, as anywhere else,' I said, looking past her into the cool, green garden and the grottoes beyond.

'Ah, you would see the world!' she said, as if she pitied me. 'They will marry,' she sighed, 'and that's how the world goes on.'

I took my leave and accepted a picture of the Sacred Heart to put into my prayer book, with innumerable prayers for indulgences printed at the back.

As I closed the iron gate behind me, I felt as if I were abandoned. It was as if I had been told I had given up something precious for the call of the flesh and would now forever be occupied with material concerns, which was probably true. Just then the bells were ringing and I fled once more into the future, but not so fabulous a one as I had imagined before.

Along the road back to the station, looking sweaty and depressed, the old priest and spiritual adviser of the nuns was coming towards me carrying his hat in his hand. Dear me, what should I say to him. He rather stared at me, but did not seem to recognize me after all. It could not be me, he must have thought. Had not I gone to live in England only a little while ago. I walked on without speaking, threw a few coins into the roadside shrines and decided to go and see my Aunt Lucy.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

THERE was no one to bind me to Grandmama's glade now except Aunt Lucy who had taken it over and turned it into a Place of Healing, as she called it. It was a house of solid timber as so many of them are in Switzerland. No cheap pretence or imitation, no warped doors, no damp walls, but scrubbed floorboards, starched muslin curtains and copper pans on the shelves. Here Grandmama had lived in isolation and in very humble circumstances because of the man she loved.

As Aunt Lucy attended to her 'patients' who had come from afar because this was one of the few counties in which it was permitted for 'nature healers' to practice, I sat alone in the panelled room imagining that Grandmama was calling me, that she was taking shape right in front of me with her striped apron on.

Aunt Lucy looked rather an oddity, very tall and very lean, her hair cut short like a man's, wearing a dark green overall, staring at her visitors, noting this and that about them, their hair, their eyes, their necks, their ankles, their complexions, their hands and fingernails as well as their teeth. She certainly had a flair for diagnosis. There were sacks of herbs in the corner of the kitchen and dark brown

bottled brews of her own making ready to send away. A smell of garlic permeated the whole house. She did not charge anything for her advice, it was not necessary, but on the slate-topped table I saw that she had done her accounts and it seemed to me that she had not done badly.

At the side of the tiled stove, I climbed through the trap-door to Grandmama's bedroom. The same old inlaid bedstead, the same crocheted white cover, and on the wall a tablet carved by my grandfather, who used to write stories for children of knights and warriors, saying 'Glory indeed may be acquired by arms, but such without the pen fades in oblivion'. Thick bunches of geraniums covered almost all the windows. The light that shone through their petals was as translucent as that of rubies. A new pear tree grew up the trellis outside the house. What peace, what harmony, what contentment there is about an old house that had been built with perfect taste and artistry. And with love.

When Aunt Lucy finished her session she came up through the trap-door and in turn stared at me. Then she made a statement as gently as she knew how.

'Lyse, you're pregnant!' Her smile was triumphant. I said that this was news to me and how did she know.

'Come over here,' she said, pulling me by the hand. 'I can always tell. The signs are there in the face, in the veins of your eyes, beneath the eyes, around the mouth. I can tell at once.'

This caught me in the very centre of some psychological crisis. It would, I realized, alter my whole life. My loyalties were shifting round again. I wanted to fly back to England at once. But was it true?

'We'll soon find out,' said Aunt Lucy.

She went across to the field and brought in a handful of nettles with which she lined a chamber-pot. 'By morning

the nettles should be full of red spots. I've never know this test to fail, and I can tell you too if it will be a boy or girl. But not yet at this stage.' Then she said that if only she had known about my grumbling appendix she would have cured me easily. With herbs.

'And what about John's family? Are they really kind to you?'

'Well, you see, they seem to be rather special.'

'Special, in what way?'

'I don't really know, socially I expect, or financially, or both.'

'Holy cow!' was all she said scratching her head, messing up her short grey hair.

Aunt Lucy set the table and opened a bottle of home-made wine, heavy, dark red fluid, very sweet and oily. Soon all our unkind thoughts about those English relations were mollified. We ceased to think almost altogether. Aunt Lucy was begging me to stay with her. 'Stay until John comes along to fetch you,' she said. 'Or better still, stay here for good.' It was indeed a place of peace, of joy even. We began to giggle a little and Aunt Lucy began to imitate what she imagined English ladies of the upper classes to look like. She pushed her dentures forward until they rested on her bottom lip, sucking in her cheeks. It made her look like a skeleton. It was awful.

'Come,' she said eventually and took me by the hand and led me out towards the glade. We staggered a little, for the wine we had drunk contained, she said, fifty per cent alcohol. It could be used as embrocation too and as a disinfectant.

'God,' she said, pointing to the sky as though He were sitting there upon a throne as depicted by the pictures in the cloister of the convent, 'God has sent you back here for a purpose.' What with my Mama's frequent premonitions

and Aunt Lucy's prophecy, the English did not now seem half as mad in retrospect.

Later in the evening Aunt Lucy changed into her best black bombazine and as we sat by the pond watching a loach beneath some ferns, while a church bell tolled, being answered by another church bell lower down the valley, we ate our supper. Garlic sausage and rosehip wine. She wanted to know what I did all day long when alone at home at The Pines. I said I often sat in the lime tree watching people going by, men going to work at nine or even ten o'clock, shockingly late really, but when you came to think of it, charmingly lackadaisical. I was rather idle as a whole. It was as if I were asleep and had no part in anything. Perhaps it was the climate. It was not bracing. When the weather was nice, I walked in one of the parks, a lovely place really, full of deer and flowers, or went inside the museum to see varnished fishes, or the human body made of plaster, also varnished, showing all the organs in brilliant hues of red, purple and yellow.

'All that,' said Aunt Lucy, 'will straighten itself out when you have some children.'

After we both had a bath in the wash-house, we climbed the ladder up to Grandmama's old bedroom once more, but somehow neither of us felt like going to sleep. Aunt Lucy sat in the rocking chair which had been Grandmama's, looking rather daft in a thick flannel nightgown, combing some liquid made of walnut skins through her greying hair. It coloured it a reddish-brown. She was singing now. We both began to sing, for the Swiss like bursting into song at the slightest provocation. They would rather sing, it seemed, than listen to the sounds of nature.

After that we started reminiscing. I told her about Mother, Father, Aunt Ethel and Mrs. Hemmingway, and made myself unhappy again. I lapsed into silence wondering

what was to become of me, what was to become of John and the slump, and England, and the whole wide world. Aunt Lucy was not the type to say very much. Like John, she had at all times but few words. This made her a splendid healer. She listened and nodded her head with infinite understanding. 'I've something for you that will help a great deal in the future, especially in that climate,' she said as she rose to rummage in a drawer. I thought she was about to give me a book of meditation. But it was a necklace of sorts, an aerial she called it, made of twisted wires. As though she were putting a halo on my head she let it fall round my throat and begged me to wear it always. Like an amulet or a mascot. It was not, she said indignantly, to keep off the evil eye, but to draw health-giving rays out of the cosmos 'and so supply you with a devil-may-care attitude to life'. She murmured something to herself as she pushed the thing inside the collar of my nightgown. Whether she was saying a little prayer, I had no idea. I was thankful that Mother or Aunt Ethel did not see us at it. Even here in the old home, the very thought of them seemed somehow to cramp my style.

When I awoke in the morning, Aunt Lucy stood before me and, as if she were an angel of annunciation, she told me that it was unmistakably true that I was going to have a baby. She put away her magnifying glass, snatched the halo from the bedside table and put it round my neck again.

The morning had a timeless quality. It seemed years since I had left The Pines. My whole existence in the Midlands seemed to have become unreal to me. I had always imagined John and I to be one of the world's greatest pair of lovers. It was frightening to think that a girl almost straight from the convent could spend a honeymoon with the man of her choice and after parting from him for so short a time



feel as though the memory of him were already slightly fading. It was high time I went back to him again.

Aunt Lucy was seeing her patients all through the morning. They were a sad sight, crippled, lame and sore, 'given up by their doctors long ago'. They all looked a great deal happier when they left Aunt Lucy, which was worthwhile in itself. It was Friday, the day she brewed her cough mixture. The whole house now smelt of liquorice, cinnamon and mint. 'There isn't much anyone can do for a cough,' she said, 'it has to get better on its own. Unless you can send a person for a change of air.' I hoped that Aunt Lucy, in her after life, would not be judged by the concoctions with which she was filling those large green bottles, labelling them at random, but by the hope she had been handing out among so many weary ones.

With the almost tearful good wishes of Aunt Lucy in my ears, I walked for nearly an hour to the nearest railway station. If you were a Swiss, you had to do a great deal of walking, for buses were not very plentiful. Once or twice she waved a big white handkerchief. Once a foreign charabanc of sightseers passed me and a woman in a wheelchair on a lorry, one of Aunt Lucy's patients, was driven down the road. I seemed to be in the grip of an enraptured state, trudging happily along, for all was well now in this world. It must have been the miracle I had asked for coming true. I was going to have a baby and the baby would be British, and as I was not the same girl that had left England so short a time ago, I was going to be British too, as British as I knew how, tough, cool, a spartan member of a brave country that was for ever suffering for its victories.

In this, the Catholic part of the county of Appenzell, the saints abounded. One could not help in such surroundings pondering on Heaven, Hell and Eternity most of the time, asking to become good and saintly too and live a life beyond

the dreams of poets. Those holy ones in all those niches and those little shrines built by individuals here and there, hundreds of years ago, in thanksgiving for a miracle, had also led most interesting lives, not caring where they lived either, existing on crumbs and locusts even, scorning comforts. And those Holy Women in their shrines, how they looked down at me with that fixed and mysterious smile of patient motherhood! Gone was the stony worried gaze of St. Joseph. In its place I only saw the face of John. My John!

And then I arrived in Altbad and came upon humanity once more. As it was Saturday again, the roadsweeper had swept every path and nook and corner of the place. Buses stood outside open-air restaurants, some with G.B. plates on them. The smell of chestnut blossoms was strong, mingling with the scent of pines. People around me were speaking English, which somehow delighted me, I wanted to go up to them and tell them I came from England too. But this would have seemed irregular and over-impulsive to them, and if I wanted to become British, I would have to learn to control myself.

Then I met Marti, who still behaved as if I had done something foolish by marrying an Englishman. How dapper he looked, how self-assured. I could tell that he had made up his mind to discover why I was there, asking me to join him at the table in front of the Belvedere. He flicked his finger at my permanently waved hair and said, 'You've done your best to look like a tourist, haven't you?' Then his eyes left my hair and bore downwards to my stomach. Not yet pregnant, he seemed to think. Little did he know. I told him I had only come home to recuperate from an appendix operation. He said he was damned certain that if I had married him I would not have run home on my honeymoon. I would not have wanted to. You would not,

his eyes suggested, leave the kind of lover I would have been. I felt very angry indeed. What was there about me that suggested to everyone everywhere and at all times that they could talk to me like that? But I was a lady now, and a married woman, prepared neither to feel nor display any emotion. I said he was funny as always and appeared to me, since I had seen him last, funnier than ever.

While Marti paid for the wine, I watched some of the English walking about the street, well-bred and a little bored, looking up to the mountains without undue awe or surprise. Scenery was scenery and that was that. Marti watched them too and I was proud of their restraint.

Then, crossing the bridge over the river, I saw in front of me another Englishman wearing shorts. He was talking to the postman who was Josephine's uncle, the one who crooned so painfully when playing with the jazz-band on Saturday afternoons in the nearest town. They were watching men fishing for trout, catching them as easily as boys did tiddlers on the River Trent. As I turned up the lane which led to Papa's homestead, I saw that the man in the shorts was Dr. Green. Later, I saw him again, just before sunset, walking past the house with the priest and, feeling very happy, I gathered that he had not come for nothing.

All the evening, we sat in the garden, Papa, Mama and I. It was as if something separated us already. Perhaps, like many an exile, I had had to come home to make sure that it was not now my home any longer. It had been necessary to make it final. It hurt terribly, it is true. The Sitter, flowing by, and the Rhine, used to be my rivers. The Lake of Constance my lake, and now it would have to be the River Trent. John would have laid the fire on the hearth for me to light when I came home. The room would be silent, vacant, the books on the shelves untouched, awaiting my return. I would wrap up my diary, which lay hidden

in the attic, tie it up with string, and put it away for thirty years. It would be another England then, of another generation, less insular perhaps, more tolerant of foreigners. Who knows?

In the silence of the night, I went on to the balcony. The rhythm of the water mill became pronounced. How pure the air was. If there is any place on earth truly haunted, it is an alpine village at dawn, the birdsong, the lowing of cows, the tolling of the bells for early Mass. Good-bye little stream, I said, good-bye lily-scented garden, good-bye little rowan tree.

## Chapter Thirty

WELL, there was the grey North to go back to. Even though I did not return to John with camels and she-asses, I would be able to surprise him about the baby. It is true it would be an English child. It would tie me to England as nothing else would.

When I arrived in the Midlands the sky was blue. It was not midnight-blue like the Mediterranean, or blue like a Gentian, but blue as a forget-me-not, or a baby's eyes. Yes, a baby's eyes. And when I reached the avenue, I saw right from the distance that The Pines had been repainted in a dull bottle-green. The stucco had also been renewed, the gate mended and painted green as well. There it stood, bleak and forbidding. But it was now Home and I was sure that one day I would wake up in the morning with the sun streaming into the window and a baby at my side and then I would know that I belonged and was not a stranger any longer. Mother had written saying that The Pines would now be ours. I would have to thank her.

John had asphalted the yard and built a cycle shed. Inside, the sofa and the chairs had new chintz covers, which were identical with Betty's and with Eleanor's. I walked from room to room. On the kitchen table, along with

several milk bottles and oily rags, lay part of the tandem, scattered on the window-sill and on the floor were spokes and a three-speed gear. The way these things were spread out in their proper piles, I could see that John had spent his Sunday overhauling not only his cycle but his lawn mower as well. It made me very happy to see it there. It made me feel tremendously maternal too.

It was not much later when John came up the garden path, unaware of my return. How awfully handsome he looked. And how embarrassed he would feel if I told him so. The gate swung sharply to behind him and when he saw me standing in the doorway his eyes lit up as never before and I knew that I had come home at last.

*Also by*  
**ALYSE SIMPSON**

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## **RED DUST OF AFRICA**

This is a book full of life and colour and a sensitivity to atmosphere which throws into strong contrast a Swiss mountain village and a Kenya farm.

Born and brought up in Switzerland, Alyse married John, an Englishman, with whom she went to farm the desolate valley of the Saltlick. This is her story—of a woman who loved all that was pretty and feminine cast into a masculine world. Born an Englishwoman, with pioneering in her blood, she might have been happier, but the Swiss are tied body and soul to the soil of their homeland. This Alyse Simpson teaches her readers to understand in the charming early chapters of her book in which she recollects the years of her girlhood and of her courtship.

Once in Kenya she knew that she would never leave John and that John would never leave the Saltlick. She strove therefore to find as naturally as did he and other Englishmen in that godforsaken country, serenity of mind and tenacity of purpose in wringing a living from the unwilling soil. But while she tried to accept the lonely wilderness, the disappointments in their farming exploits, the savage weather, the greedy jungle, she yearned always for the lush prosperity of her homeland, its prettiness, its dependability, its gentle cows, its majestic alps.

RED DUST OF AFRICA tells of her struggle to conquer herself—for who but she had chosen to marry John instead of Marti, the young doctor paying her such attentions in her home village. Her disquietude ends as she least expects it. She and her baby daughter are driving away with her Swiss uncle—and Marti—for a holiday in Switzerland from which she wonders if she will have the courage to return, when a swarm of locust descends upon the valley destroying utterly the first crop on John's farm and she knows that the choice between her two loyalties has finally been made. 15/- net